

# MOTIVATION, SATISFACTION, AND RETENTION

Understanding the importance of vets'  
day-to-day work experiences

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Report by

**Dr Christopher Begeny, Professor Michelle Ryan and Dr Renata Bongiorno**  
Psychology, University of Exeter

and **Officers and staff of the British Veterinary Association**

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For more information please contact:

**BVA Public Affairs**

020 7908 6340

publicaffairs@bva.co.uk

**BVA Policy Team**

020 7908 6370

policy@bva.co.uk



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# Foreword

“A profession in charge of its future” is the vision at the heart of the Vet Futures report. And the heart of the veterinary profession is the people that work within it.



Throughout the many and varied conversations during the Vet Futures project, workforce issues have been prominent, and many of the recommendations within the Vet Futures report related to better understanding our work-related challenges. When the Vet Futures Action Plan was published in July 2016, BVA embraced the task of undertaking a veterinary workforce study that would provide evidence we could use to sustain a happy, healthy profession.

Tempting as it was to rely on what we thought we already knew to proffer solutions, it was apparent that our existing views were being framed by a large amount of anecdote and very little evidence. So we pulled together a collaborative roundtable of people with an interest in this area in order to evaluate the enormity of our task and this project was born.

We are grateful to Professor Michelle Ryan, Dr Christopher Begeny and their team at the University of Exeter for leading the project. We had worked with Michelle briefly during the early days of the Vet Futures project and been very impressed with her insights into workforce matters in other professional fields; it was clear that her team's expertise would lead to a meaningful piece of work for the veterinary profession.

Stress, burnout, lack of career progression... all leading to the 'leaky bucket' of colleagues leaving the profession and leaving behind a recruitment crisis. From the outset, it was clear that we were well versed in *describing* the problems, but the challenge would be to understand the causes behind the problems, and how these various factors were interlinked. This report does exactly that.

As a BVA Officer during the life of this project, I was pleased that our approach was supported by our colleagues in other veterinary organisations, particularly the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons. I am particularly grateful to the many BVA members who shared their personal experiences and views via the BVA Voice of the Veterinary Profession Survey providing us with such rich data upon which to draw the conclusions outlined in this report.

This is just the beginning. This report provides us with the evidence we need to build solutions and share ideas to change the culture of our profession to better support our vital veterinary workforce, now and in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gudrun Ravetz".

**Gudrun Ravetz**  
BVA Officer 2015–2018

The logo for Vet Futures, featuring the word "VETFUTURES" in blue capital letters next to a stylized star icon composed of six overlapping colored shapes (purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, red) arranged in a circle.

**VETFUTURES**

For more information about the Vet Futures project visit [www.vetfutures.org.uk](http://www.vetfutures.org.uk)

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# What's happening to the veterinary workforce?

In 2017 the University of Exeter and the British Veterinary Association came together to discuss how we could collaborate to better understand the experiences of individuals within a veterinary career. The project developed from Vet Futures, the jointly led BVA and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons initiative. In particular we wanted to develop a clear understanding of some of the key drivers of vets' engagement with their careers and their intentions to stay within the profession. Through the discussion we came up with four key priorities:

**1**

**Understanding the drop in vets' motivation and job satisfaction after five years**

**2**

**Understanding vets' lack of confidence**

**3**

**Understanding work-life balance issues, including long hours and the need for flexible working**

**4**

**Understanding the gendered nature of the veterinary profession**



With these priorities in mind, in the BVA Voice of the Veterinary Profession Survey Autumn 2017 we included a series of questions designed to examine vets' day-to-day experiences among their colleagues. The results revealed a wealth of information, some of it confirming experiences reported in previous surveys, and some of it revealing new insights. Importantly, the design of the study allowed us to understand the relationships between the various experiences those in the profession are having, and to therefore glean insight into some of the processes underlying motivation and retention.

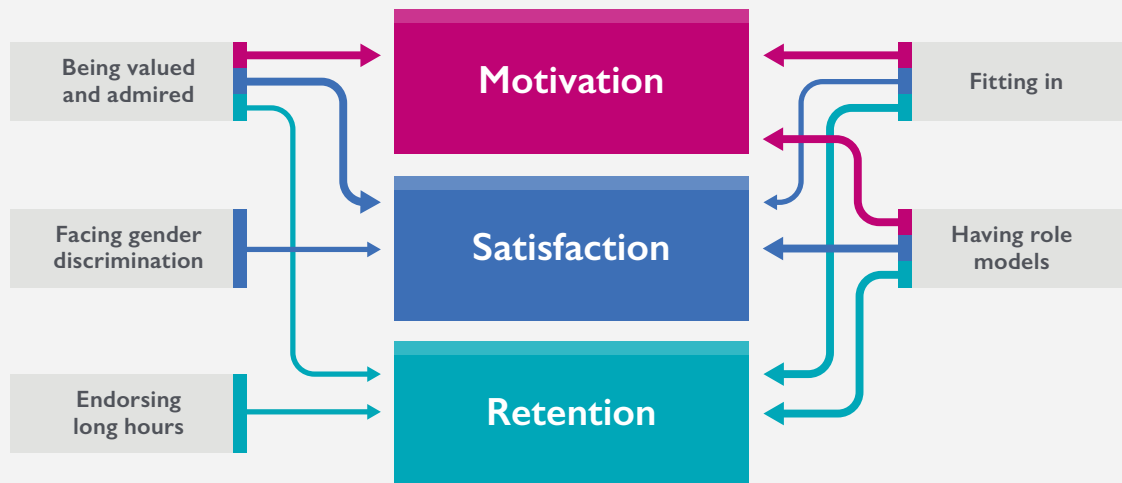
In total we had responses from 1,250 vets. The results described in this report reflect the experiences and perceptions of the 1,039 survey respondents who are currently working as an employee, manager and/or business owner/partner (note: the number of respondents in any particular set of analyses can vary slightly, as some individuals did not complete every survey question). These results are also based on analyses that statistically controlled for a variety of potentially relevant differences between respondents' own backgrounds, including their age, gender, years of experience and current role in the profession, and the number of hours they typically work. This means the results evidenced here stand true over and above any effects that these background characteristics might have on the processes described.

On the following pages we focus on some of the key findings we have extracted from the BVA Voice Survey. In the text boxes on pages 6 and 7 you can find Quick Fact Analyses that focus on how individuals' experiences at work and their general working environment feed into a number of important motivational attitudes, including their confidence, career ambitions, and sense of work-life balance, as well as their job satisfaction (and conversely, sense of stress and burnout) and also their desire to leave the profession.

We also provide more in-depth analyses to illustrate how the quality of one's workplace experiences and environment can sometimes have different implications for women and men. This report can be read alongside the full report from the BVA Voice of the Veterinary Profession Survey Autumn 2017.

## Some key findings

As can be seen in each of the Quick Fact Analyses text boxes, key outcome measures for motivation, satisfaction and retention were all predicted by a core set of workplace experiences. As can be seen from the figure below, key experiential variables of (a) being valued and admired, (b) feeling like one fits in with those who have been successful before you, and (c) having role models, all have an important part to play in motivating vets, facilitating their workplace satisfaction, and retaining them in the profession. To a lesser extent, but no less importantly, not endorsing long work hours was associated with decreased retention, while experiencing gender discrimination decreased satisfaction. Taken together, these results suggest that if the profession as a whole, and employers more specifically, can implement practices that facilitate feeling valued, fitting in, and the availability of role models, this is likely to have multiple benefits in terms of cultivating a cohort of vets who are strongly motivated in their careers, who are satisfied with their jobs, and who are keen to stay within the profession.



### QUICK FACT ANALYSES: MOTIVATION

#### Confidence, career potential, and ambition

Overall, the results from the BVA Voice Survey suggest that vets' motivation, which encompasses confidence, career potential, and ambition, is very much affected by their day-to-day experiences in the profession. In general, confidence levels were very high, with 84% of vets agreeing they felt confident. In terms of their career potential vets thought they were moderate (approximately 55% agreed that they had good career potential), and the level of ambition they expressed was moderate too (approximately 58% agreed they felt ambitious). The most important predictors of these motivational feelings are feeling valued and admired by their colleagues at work, feeling that one has a sense of fitting in with those who have been successful before them, and feeling that one has role models available to them.

### QUICK FACT ANALYSES: SATISFACTION

#### Job satisfaction and burnout

Similarly, wellbeing (in terms of stress and burnout) and job satisfaction were also very much associated with their day-to-day experiences. Job satisfaction was moderate, with approximately 61% of respondents indicating that they were satisfied with their job. This satisfaction was shown to be affected, most of all, by having role models, feeling valued at work, and endorsing a culture of long work hours, and, to a lesser extent, feeling a sense of fit with those who have been successful before them. Unsurprisingly, experiencing gender discrimination at work reduced job satisfaction. Levels of stress and burnout were not insignificant with 21% of people reporting they were unable to cope with the stress, 63% feeling they were working too hard, and 48% feeling burnout. Those who reported experiencing gender discrimination at work experienced more stress and burnout. Importantly, lower stress and burnout was experienced when individuals had role models, when they endorsed a culture of long work hours, and, to a lesser extent, when they had a feeling of fitting in and feeling valued at work.

## QUICK FACT ANALYSES: RETENTION

### Psychological exit and the desire to leave the profession

Looking at retention issues there was evidence of psychological exit. Psychological exit can be measured in a number of ways, for example 61% of respondents reported feeling less ambitious in their careers, and approximately 25% reported a lack of engagement with their careers. Moreover, up to 37% of respondents reported actively thinking about leaving the profession. These retention indicators are affected by day-to-day experiences. In particular, by far the strongest predictor of retention was the availability of role models, followed by having a sense of fitting with those who have been successful before them. A sense of being valued and admired, and endorsing the long hours work culture were also predictors of retention.

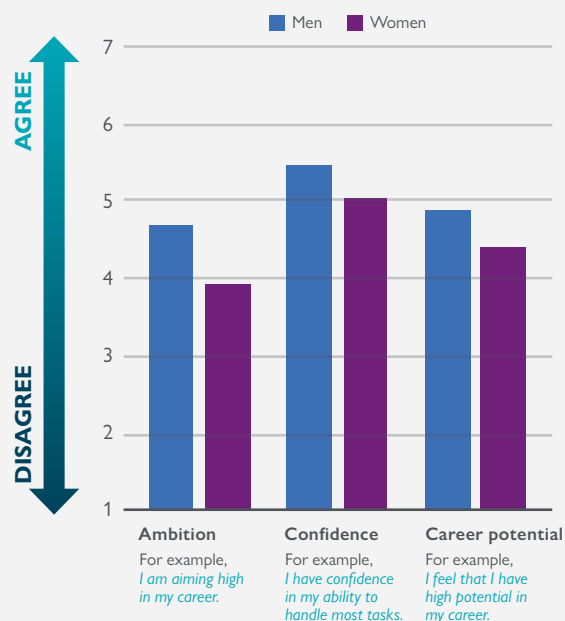
## Understanding gender differences

While all of the patterns we describe above hold for both male and female vets, there are some findings that revealed the gendered nature of the veterinary profession. For example, as

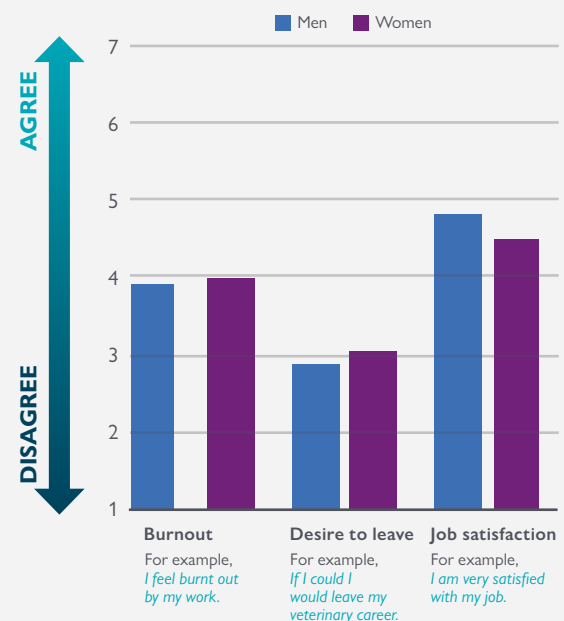
can be seen in the graphs below, there are key significant gender differences in workplace experiences, such that female vets report lower career ambition, lower confidence, as having less career potential, and higher burnout. In the following sections we explore these gendered experiences, looking at the psychological processes that underlie these differences.

### Gender differences:

#### Career ambitions, confidence and perceived potential



#### Burnout at work, desire to leave and job satisfaction



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## How male and female vets are treated at work: Implications for their confidence and career ambitions

### Key gender differences

Results of the BVA Voice Survey indicate that male vets, compared to female vets, feel significantly more confident (eg in their abilities, likelihood of reaching their full potential in their career) and a stronger sense of career ambition.

### Predictors of confidence, career ambitions

Consistent with research we have conducted in other fields (eg finance, IT/tech) results suggest that whether vets develop a strong (vs. weak) sense of confidence in their professional abilities, and a strong (vs. weak) sense of career ambition, depends in part on how they are treated by colleagues during everyday interactions at work. Specifically, results indicate that when vets are more frequently asked by their colleagues to share ideas, opinions, perspectives and advice on work-related issues (experiencing what is referred to as 'distinctive treatment') it helps signal to that individual that they are highly valued within their organisation (eg practice). This, in turn, predicts individuals' (greater) self-confidence, (stronger) career ambitions, and has several other positive downstream implications including greater job satisfaction and less desire to leave/exit the profession.

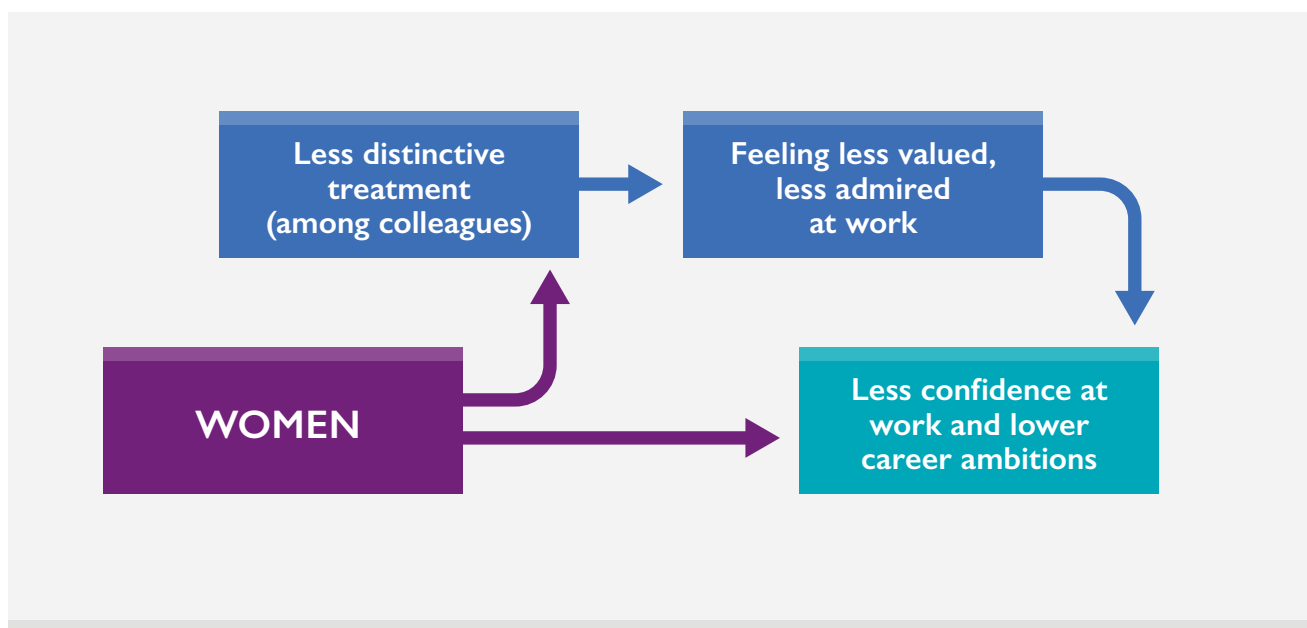
The results described above hold true for both male and female vets, suggesting that everyday interactions and experiences among colleagues are key to understanding vets' confidence and career ambitions, overall. However, further analyses show that female vets are significantly less likely to be treated in these distinctive ways, compared to their male counterparts (ie being sought out by colleagues for advice and guidance). This disparity in how male and female vets are treated, alongside evidence that this type of treatment predicts confidence/career ambitions, may help explain why disparities ultimately persist between male and female vets in terms of their confidence and career ambitions.

### Related insights gleaned from these data

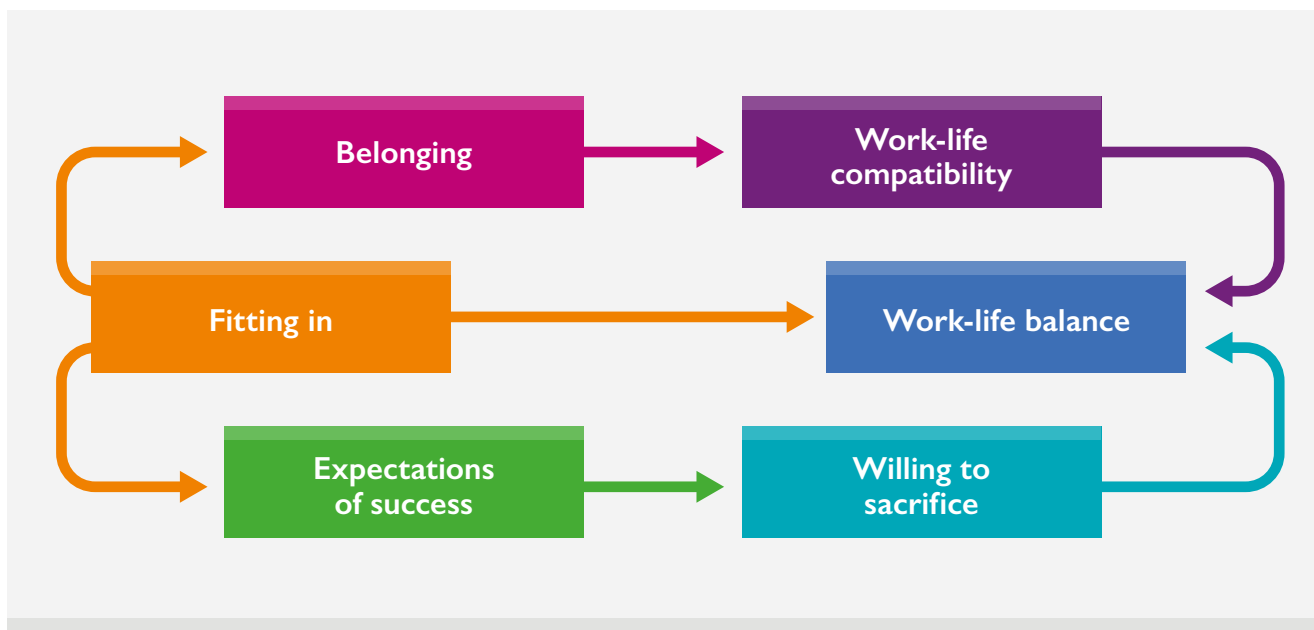
Though female vets are less likely than male vets to be sought out by colleagues for guidance, advice, etc, male and female vets are equally likely to experience being treated in ways that are generally fair and respectful.

### Implications

Together these results suggest that how vets are treated by others at work – and, in particular, how often colleagues ask them to share ideas, opinions, perspectives and advice on work-related issues – has meaningful implications for how confident they will feel in their abilities, and the career goals they set for themselves. By extension this suggests that in order to embolden vets' confidence and career ambitions it may be useful for employers, managers and others to:







(a) stay cognisant of these ‘advice-seeking’ dynamics within the workplace; (b) make efforts to seek out perspectives/advice from a broad range of their employees; (c) consider ways to facilitate more opportunities for colleagues to seek out ideas and advice from one another, and to help ensure that such opportunities are as evenly distributed as possible.

## Work-life balance

The BVA Voice Survey suggests that at the broadest level while women and men have a similar sense of work-life balance, this level of work-life balance is seen to be relatively poor, with only 50 percent of people agreeing that they have a good work-life balance. Importantly however, when comparing women and men who are statistically matched in terms of their age, role in the profession, years of experience, etc there is in fact a gender difference: men are more likely to experience a better work-life balance than women.

### Predictors of work-life balance

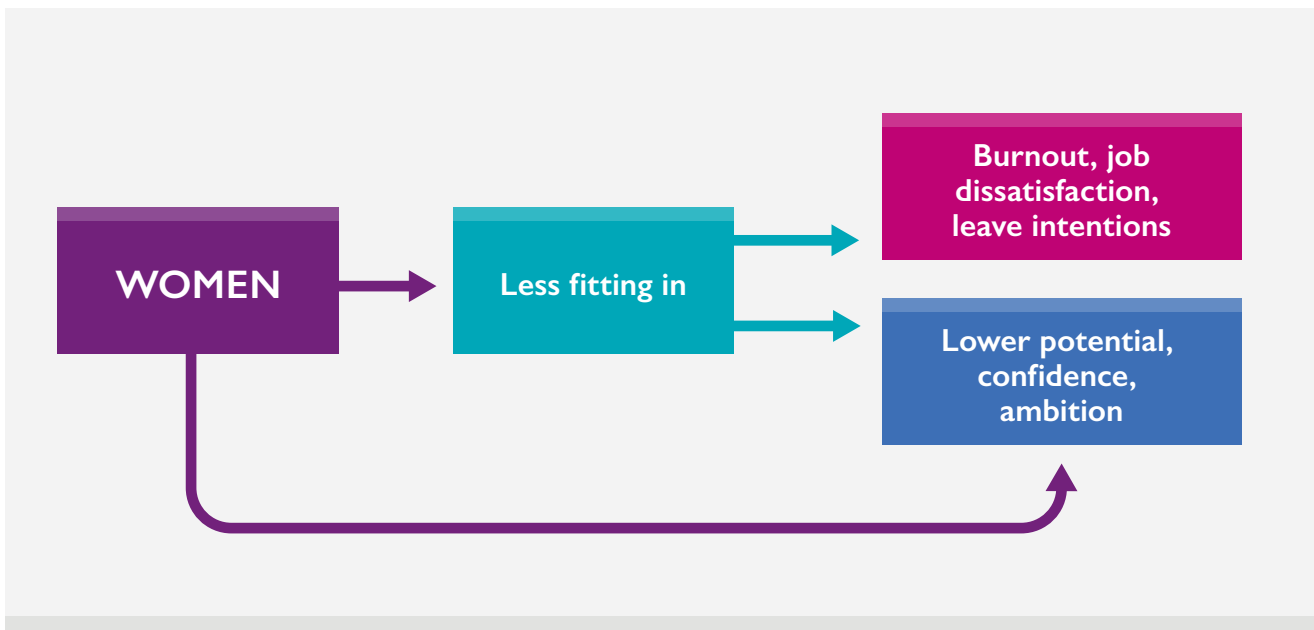
Consistent with research we have conducted in other fields (eg surgeons, the Navy) results suggest that whether vets develop a positive (vs. negative) perception of their work-life balance depends in part on their perceptions of fit. Specifically, results indicate that when vets feel that they fit in with those

who have been successful before them, they will have a more positive perception of their work-life balance. Moreover, the relationship between fit and work-life balance is explained by two routes: (1) fitting in makes vets feel that they belong and identify with the profession and this in turn gives them the sense that who they are at home is compatible with who they are at work; (2) fitting in also makes vets expect to succeed, and this in turn makes them more willing to make sacrifices for their career. Both of these routes lead to perceiving a better work-life balance.

## The importance of fit in understanding work-life balance and gendered outcomes

### Key gender differences

Results of the BVA Voice Survey indicate that male vets, compared to female vets, feel that they fit in more with leaders in the profession. We also found that male vets are more likely to feel positive about a range of motivational outcomes (such as feeling confident, feeling they can reach their potential, feeling ambition) and a range of satisfaction outcomes (feeling burnout, feeling satisfied with one’s job, intending to leave).



## Predictors of motivation and satisfaction

Consistent with research we have conducted in other fields (eg police, surgery) results suggest that whether vets develop a strong (vs. weak) sense of motivation, and a strong (vs. weak) sense of job satisfaction, depends in part on the extent to which they feel that they fit in with those who have been successful before them. More specifically, men's greater motivation in terms of potential, confidence, and ambition are in part explained by the sense they fit in with leaders in the profession. Moreover, the fact that men feel more positive about their work (in terms of burnout, satisfaction, and intentions to leave) is wholly explained by the fact that they perceive that they fit in.

## Implications

Together, these results suggest that key gender differences in workplace outcomes related to motivation and satisfaction may be improved through addressing issues of fit, as will perceptions of work-life balance for both men and women. This may be addressed in a number of ways including: (a) making available accessible and attainable role models; (b) communicating that all sorts of people have been successful in the veterinary profession; and (c) ensuring that there are clear routes to success.

## The long work hours culture: implications for vets' leave intentions, job satisfaction, and burnout

Results of the BVA Voice Survey indicate that both male and female vets agree that working long hours is typical for vets, although female vets agreed with this statement to a greater degree than men. On average, male vets reported working five hours more than female vets in a typical work week (49 vs. 44 hours). When asked about their current work hours, both male and female vets indicated that they were working 'about what is expected' of them.

## Endorsement of a long work hours culture

Male vets were significantly more likely than female vets to endorse the long work hours culture. That is, they were significantly more likely to agree with statements such as 'people who work long hours are likely to be more ambitious' and that 'expectations to work long hours are entirely reasonable.'

## Leave intentions, job satisfaction, and burnout

We examined the effect of gender differences in endorsement of a long work hours culture, along with two other common explanations for gender inequality in the workplace: perceived gender discrimination and (a lack of) role models, on the desire to leave the veterinary profession.

We found that women's lesser endorsement of a long work hours culture, along with their greater likelihood of having experienced gender-based discrimination in the workplace, was associated with an increased desire to leave the veterinary profession. While having role models was associated with a reduced desire to leave the profession, women did not report having fewer role models than men. Thus, a lack of role models was not a factor relevant to understanding women's greater desire to leave the veterinary profession, although it still remains an important factor in explaining overall motivation and retention. The exact same pattern of results found for leave intentions was also found for job satisfaction and burnout.

### Implications

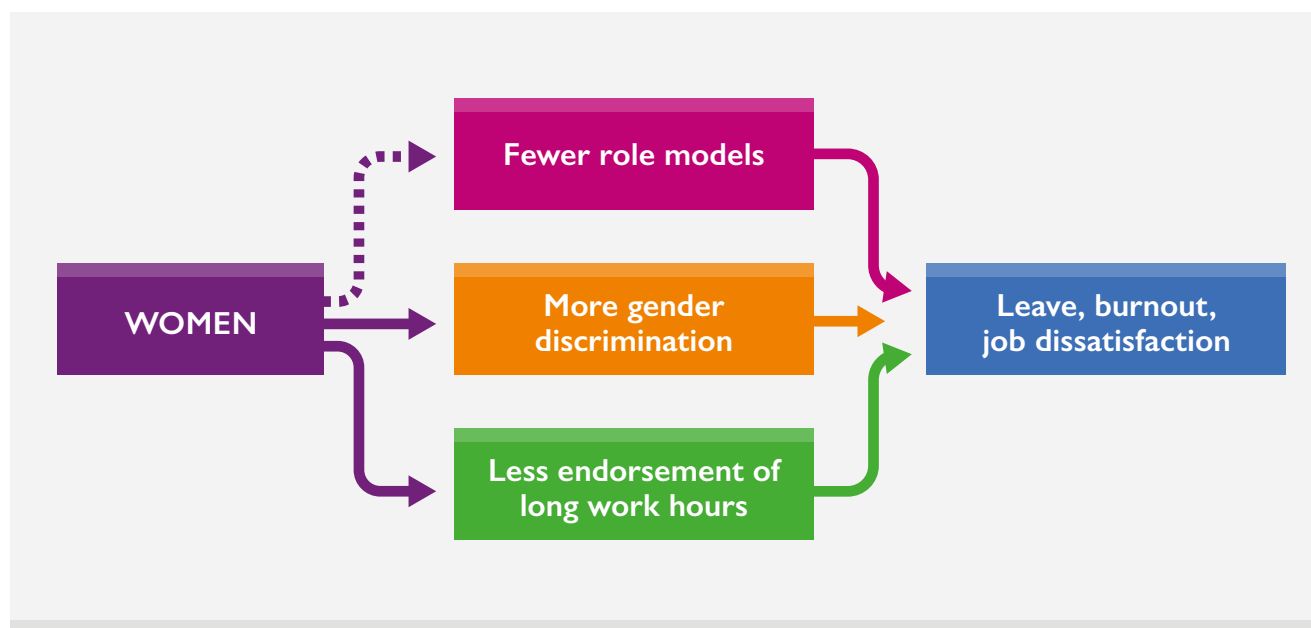
Overall, the results suggest that in addition to reducing gender-based discrimination in the workplace, challenging the culture of long work hours is likely to be important for improving female veterinary surgeons' – and indeed all veterinary surgeons' – job satisfaction, reducing their

feelings of being burnt out, and ultimately, their desire to leave the profession. Managers in particular can play an important role in supporting reduced work hours, and confronting beliefs (both in themselves and in others) that an employee's value rests on their ability to work long hours in the profession.

## Overall conclusions

Taken together, the results suggest that the day-to-day experiences of vets shape their motivations and ambitions, their job satisfaction and intentions to stay within the profession, and their health and wellbeing. While gender played a role in understanding some of these relationships, overall, there was more commonality in the experiences of women and men than there were differences.

Importantly, these are experiences that can be shaped by employers and the profession more broadly. The provision of inspiring role models, the creation of an environment where individuals feel they fit in and ensuring that employees feel valued and admired for the work that they do would likely improve the experiences of vets and improve the retention of skilled and motivated staff.



British Veterinary Association  
7 Mansfield Street  
London W1G 9NQ

Tel: 020 7908 6340  
Email: [publicaffairs@bva.co.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@bva.co.uk)  
Web: [www.bva.co.uk](http://www.bva.co.uk)

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