

# GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION

## A brief report of the BVA Employers' Study 2018

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Report by

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November 2018



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# Do women in the veterinary profession still face discrimination?

Yes – and ironically, it’s those who think women don’t face discrimination that are *most likely* to discriminate.

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## The changing face of the veterinary profession

For many, the image of James Herriot striding across a misty field still epitomises a typical vet. However, it would be hard not to notice the shifting gender composition of the veterinary profession. Indeed, over the past several decades the proportion of women has substantially increased. For instance, in 1960 less than five percent of UK veterinary surgeons were women.<sup>1</sup> Now, in 2018, that proportion is over 60 percent.<sup>2</sup>

This influx of women into the veterinary profession may be taken as a sign that gender inequality and discrimination in the profession is no a longer problem. Perhaps it’s a thing of the past. Yet to reach such a conclusion may not be wholly justified.<sup>3</sup> Female vets still face a pervasive gender pay gap<sup>4</sup> and remain underrepresented in several key roles in the profession; for example, they make up less than half of all principals, directors and partners in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

These ongoing issues of pay and representation are fairly visible inequalities. Still, many would argue that with time more talented women will progress through the pipeline, the pay gap will close and representation at senior levels will become more equal. Thus, even if signs of inequality still exist they merely reflect a phase to pass – not a real problem. This is the “just give it time” perspective, if you will.

In 2017 we established a collaboration between the University of Exeter and the British Veterinary Association to take a closer look at these issues of pay and representation, as well as the more subtle, everyday forms of workplace inequality that may exist. As part of the joint BVA/Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Vet Futures project, we are examining the consequences of the increased number of women in the profession and whether gender inequality and discrimination persist.

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## An assessment of vets’ everyday workplace experiences

In 2017, we came together to develop some strategic questions for the BVA Voice of the Veterinary Profession Autumn Survey, designed to examine female and male vets’ day-to-day experiences among colleagues. The results of this work are reported in full in *Motivation, satisfaction and retention: Understanding the importance of vets’ day-to-day work experiences* ([www.bva.co.uk](http://www.bva.co.uk)). In essence, they revealed that individuals’ experiences at work, including feeling valued among colleagues and having access to role models, have important consequences for their confidence, career ambitions and sense of work-life balance, as well as their job satisfaction (and similarly, their sense of burnout and desire to leave the profession).

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Of particular importance here, results of the Survey also demonstrated that female vets experience significantly more overt gender discrimination than male vets, and less frequently experience being treated in a positive manner by their colleagues; namely, in ways that show recognition and appreciation for their professional skills, qualities and knowledge. This included being less frequently sought out by colleagues for advice or guidance on work-related issues and being called upon less often to utilise certain skills or knowledge they possess (compared to male vets who were statistically matched on various dimensions, eg role within the profession, years of experience).

Moreover, results showed that *for both female and male vets* these types of experiences were ultimately linked to greater job satisfaction, less desire to leave the profession, greater confidence in one's abilities and greater career ambitions. So to say, these positive experiences among colleagues are vital for both female and male vets to have. Yet the fact that female vets experience them less often may explain why, ultimately, they tend to show less job satisfaction, confidence, and career ambitions compared to their male counterparts. Altogether, this would suggest that a vet's confidence and career ambitions has less to do with their gender *per se*, and more precisely has to do with how they are treated by colleagues at work.

These differences in women's and men's experiences within the veterinary profession further suggest that relying on the pipeline to address issues of inequality and representation may be problematic; 'giving it time' may not be an adequate solution. This is because women currently going through the pipeline are being treated differently from their male counterparts. They are being treated in ways that can dampen their career ambitions, confidence, and commitment to the profession. Therefore, relying on the pipeline may not be a viable solution to these issues because this differential treatment produces a pipeline that will inevitably leak.

These Survey results also highlight that some of the persistent forms of gender inequality and discrimination in the profession are subtler and not as easy to identify. To follow up on these results, and to avoid drawing conclusions from survey data alone, we decided to complement those data by conducting further experimental research, which is reported here.

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## An experimental test of gender discrimination

Together we conducted an experimental study of employers and managers in the veterinary profession to systematically look at two questions: (1) to what extent do employers and managers think women still face discrimination in the profession, and (2) to what extent do employers and managers treat female and male vets differently.

Together, the results of the study offered compelling evidence that discrimination against women not only exists – corroborating evidence described earlier – but it is in fact most commonly perpetuated by those who believe that women *do not* face discrimination.

In our experimental study approximately 260 UK-based employers, partners, and managers were asked to review a recent performance evaluation of a vet. This vet was relatively new to the field, currently in a mixed practice, and their performance was typical for junior vets – some positives, some areas for improvement. Respondents were then asked to provide their own evaluations and impressions. They were asked, among other things: How competent does this vet seem to be? Is this someone you would feel confident having in your own practice? What salary would you advise?

But the key to this study (and similar ones carried out over the past 40 years in other professional contexts) was the experimental manipulation – while everyone in the study was shown the exact same performance evaluation, there were actually two versions. They differed in one subtle way – the gender of the vet. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned to review a version in which the vet's name was "Mark." The other half reviewed a version in which the vet's name was "Elizabeth." In this way, all the information about this vet – the quality and breadth of their skills, their level of knowledge, etc – was identical, except for their gender.

Later in the study respondents were asked to provide general information about themselves and their views on the veterinary profession. This included key questions about whether they believed statements such as 'discrimination against women in the veterinary profession is no longer a problem'.

We tested whether respondents differed in their perceptions of "Mark" versus "Elizabeth," and whether these differences were more or less evident among employers and managers who did or did not believe discrimination toward women was still occurring. Notably, our analyses statistically controlled for a variety of potentially relevant differences between respondents' own backgrounds, including their age, gender, year of graduation, and years of managerial experience.

[REDACTED] Hospital  
**ANNUAL REVIEW FORM**



Name	Elizabeth [REDACTED]	Job Title	Veterinary Surgeon
Location/Dept	[REDACTED]	Review Period	01/08/16 – 01/08/17
Reviewing Manager	C.K. [REDACTED]	Review Date	05/09/17

**Performance Overview**

*Overall, how has the last year gone? What went well? What could have gone better?*

**Line Manager Comments**

**Research Engagement:** Elizabeth is clearly engaged with, and keeping up on, the most up-to-date research in a number of relevant areas. Going forward, I think this level of knowledge will make her more adept and better equipped to work on complex cases (e.g., establishing diagnoses, treatment plans).

**Communicating with Clients:** It is also quite notable that Elizabeth quickly develops a good rapport with clients. She is kind, understanding and sensitive to their needs and concerns.

**Working Independently:** At the same time, Elizabeth is not fully confident when working independently. For example, when interacting with clients she can be hesitant and a bit unsure of herself when discussing treatment plans and prognoses, risks and benefits of potential interventions, etc.

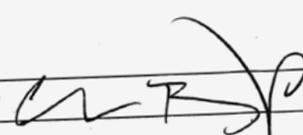
**Financial Aspects of the Practice:** It also seems that Elizabeth is yet to achieve a certain amount of insight regarding the financial and business elements of running a practice (e.g., an awareness of all the expenditures involved in running this type of business), which is an important area of knowledge to have.

**Collaborating with Colleagues:** Elizabeth also has a tendency to work alone, rather than in a collaborative manner. Similarly, she does not often seek out advice or guidance from her more senior colleagues.

**Colleague Comments**

[REDACTED]

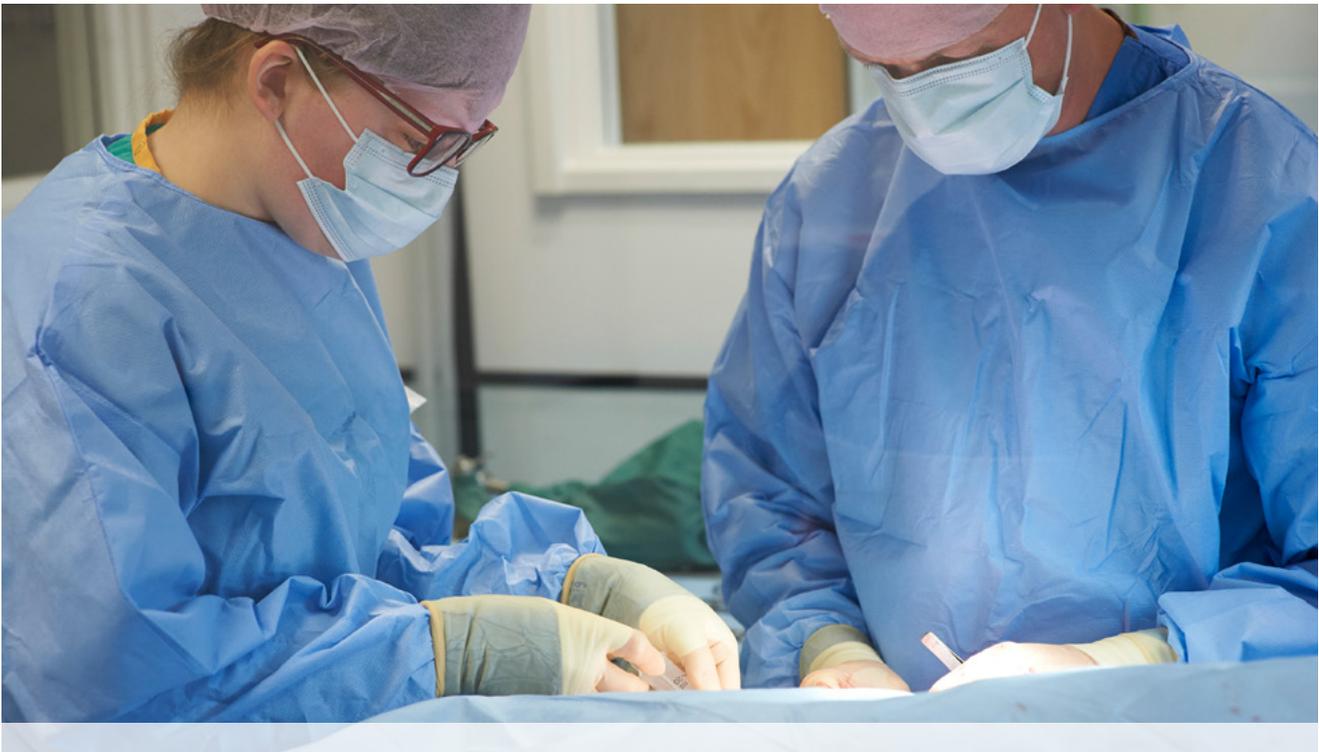
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Employee Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Manager Signature 

# The findings

## Do managers and employers think women in the veterinary profession still face discrimination?

- Overall, results showed that managers and employers vary in their beliefs about whether women in the profession still face discrimination. While 42% of respondents reported believing that it is still an issue, another 44% reported that they think it's a thing of the past – that women are no longer negatively impacted by gender biases and discrimination (14% reported being uncertain/neutral on the matter).
- Analyses also showed that those who think discrimination against women is no longer an issue differ in some ways, characteristically, from those who believe it is still an issue. Those who think women no longer face discrimination are slightly older (median age of 47 vs. 42), and it is disproportionately men who hold this belief (66% of those who hold this belief are men; by comparison, among those who believe discrimination is still an issue, only 26% are men).
- At the same time analyses demonstrated, that age and gender differences aside, these two subsets of managers/employers do not differ in other ways. For instance, comparing those who don't think discrimination is still an issue to those who do, there are no significant differences in terms of the number of years of managerial experience they have.

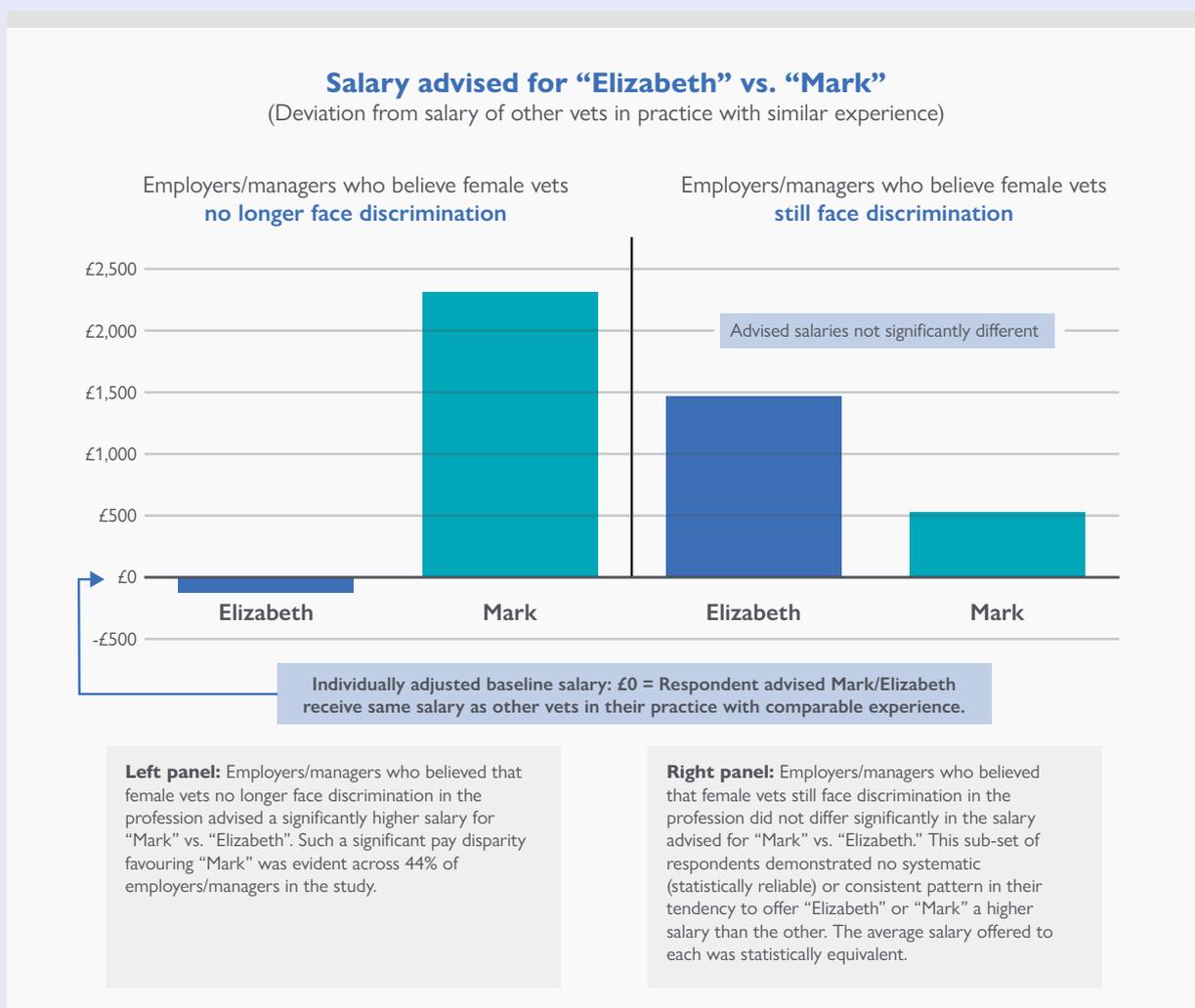


## How would managers/employers pay, evaluate and treat “Mark” vs. “Elizabeth”?

The results of our experiment demonstrated there were indeed differences in how respondents said they would perceive, treat, and pay “Mark” versus “Elizabeth.” However, these differences were only systematically evident among those who believed women in the profession no longer face discrimination.

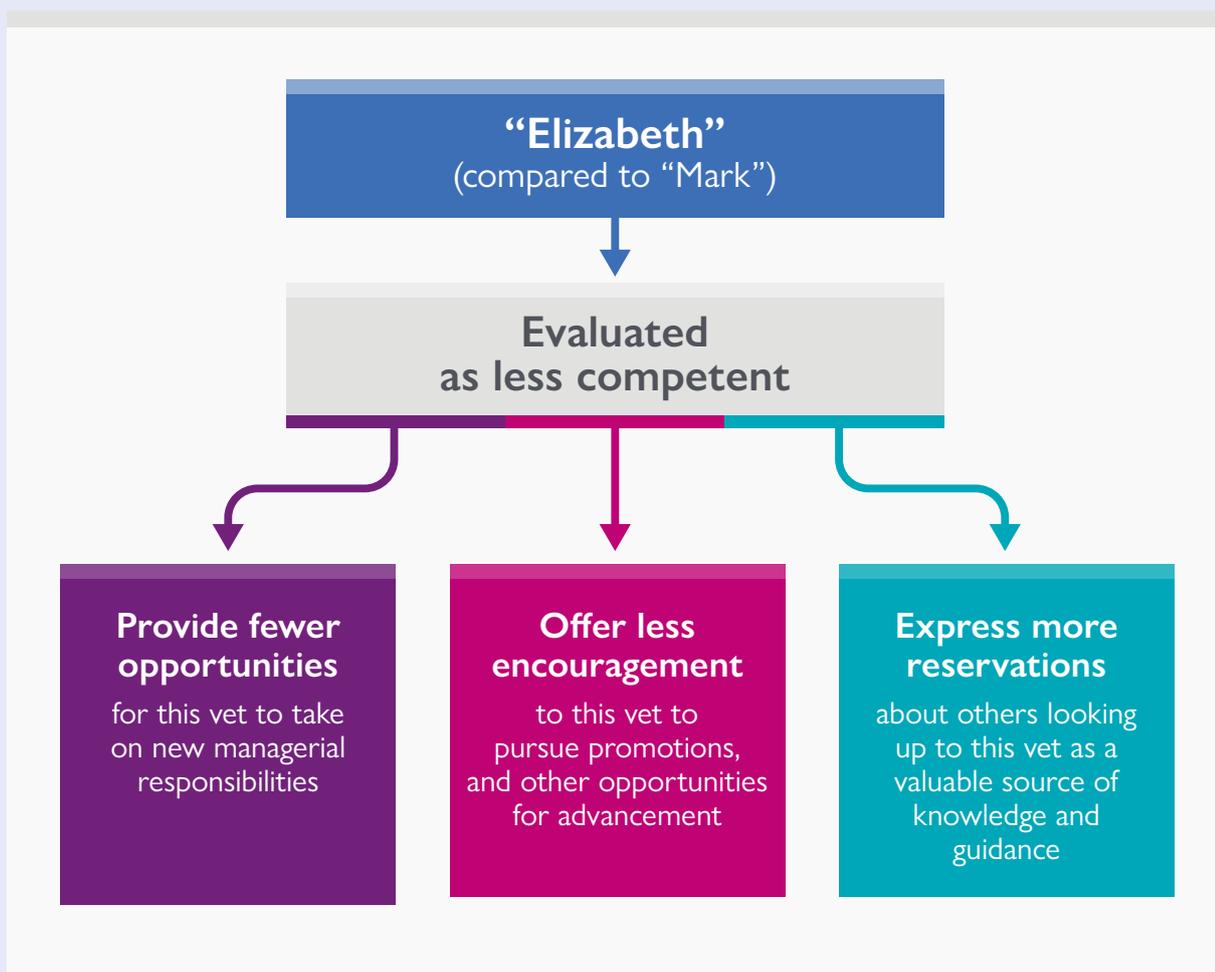
### Here are some of the key findings:

- Those who believed female vets no longer experience discrimination – 44% of respondents – offered “Mark” a significantly higher salary than “Elizabeth” (see figure, left panel), ranging from £1,100 to £3,300 more. Those who most strongly endorsed this belief showed the strongest pay disparity.
- Importantly, while this pay disparity was largest among those who were most confident that women in the profession no longer experience discrimination, even those who were generally indifferent or uncertain about this issue tended to pay “Mark” more than “Elizabeth.”



- Those who believed female vets no longer experience discrimination also believed “Mark” was significantly more competent than “Elizabeth.”
- These perceptions of competence further predicted how employers and managers indicated they would treat “Mark” or “Elizabeth.” For instance, with greater levels of perceived competence employers and managers indicated they would be: (a) more likely to let this vet take on more managerial responsibilities (including more involvement in the business and financial side of the practice), (b) more strongly encourage them to pursue promotions in the near future, and (c) more likely to advise other vets to look to this vet as a valuable source of knowledge (see diagram, below).
- By comparison, those who believed female vets still experience the negative impact of gender biases and discrimination showed little to no difference in how they perceived or treated “Mark” versus “Elizabeth”.

Altogether, this suggests there is a near even split among employers and managers about whether discrimination against female vets is still a problem. Notably, this split does not fall squarely along gender lines. Although men are more likely to believe discrimination is not a problem, there is a sizable portion of women who believe this too. Results were in fact quite clear showing that it is these *beliefs*, not an employer’s or manager’s own gender, that explains who tends to discriminate against women. Thus, ironically, it is those who believe gender bias is no longer a problem who tend to express the most gender bias, favouring “Mark” over “Elizabeth”.



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## Why is it that those who think women do not face discrimination tend to discriminate?

Social psychological theory offers at least two relevant perspectives on this.<sup>6,7</sup> First, believing women no longer face discrimination, including in the veterinary profession, potentially reflects a lack of awareness of the subtle ways in which discrimination toward women can manifest itself. For example, pervasive stereotypes often portray men as more competent, and this can subtly impact how we perceive two individuals even if they are equally qualified in every way (exemplified here by “Mark” and “Elizabeth”). Yet people who hold this belief may be unlikely to stop and ‘check themselves’ when expressing potentially gender-biased behaviour, something to which we are all susceptible. By comparison, people who are aware of gender stereotypes may more readily check their underlying rationale for thinking someone is especially competent, or that someone’s past performance warrants a certain level of remuneration.

Second, the endorsement of these beliefs can also be rooted in what is, more simply, a reflection of sexist attitudes.<sup>6,7</sup> Given current social norms regarding the unacceptability of being overtly sexist however, some suggest that these attitudes will only be expressed in ways that are more covert or ‘safe.’ If there is *something* an individual can point to as plausible evidence that their beliefs do not reflect ‘sexism’ they may feel more comfortable expressing those sexist beliefs. For example, one might contend ‘no, I don’t think female vets are impacted by gender discrimination. Why? Because over half the vets in this country are female,’ while at the same time being aware of, but disregarding, evidence to the contrary (eg an extant gender pay gap) and ultimately favouring male vets over female vets, including “Mark” over “Elizabeth”, in subtly biased ways.

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## Why does this matter?

We think these results offer a compelling piece of evidence that even when *everything* about two vets is equal, their gender can still significantly impact upon how they are perceived, treated, and paid. Together with other ‘real-world’ data collected in recent years (eg on vet salaries,<sup>8</sup> vets’ reports of gender discrimination<sup>9</sup>), the results of this study add to what seems to be an increasingly clear point: gender inequality and discrimination in the veterinary profession is alive and well, albeit sometimes subtle.

At the same time, this study illustrates some important nuance to that point. Yes, it appears that discrimination is still a problem, negatively impacting the careers of women in this profession. But not everyone is necessarily contributing to this inequality. Instead it seems there may be a subset of individuals – substantial in size, but a subset no less – who may need to take a little extra time at work to consider whether the “Mark” of their own workplace is truly more competent and capable than their “Elizabeth.” Is he genuinely a better pick for this upcoming opportunity to take on or develop new managerial skills? Is he really deserving of a slightly better pay rise than her? Future research will look at ways in which to address these beliefs<sup>10</sup> and ameliorate such subtle inequalities.

[REDACTED] Hospital  
**ANNUAL REVIEW FORM**



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Location/Dept	[REDACTED]	Review Period	01/08/16 – 01/08/17
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**Colleague Comments**

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