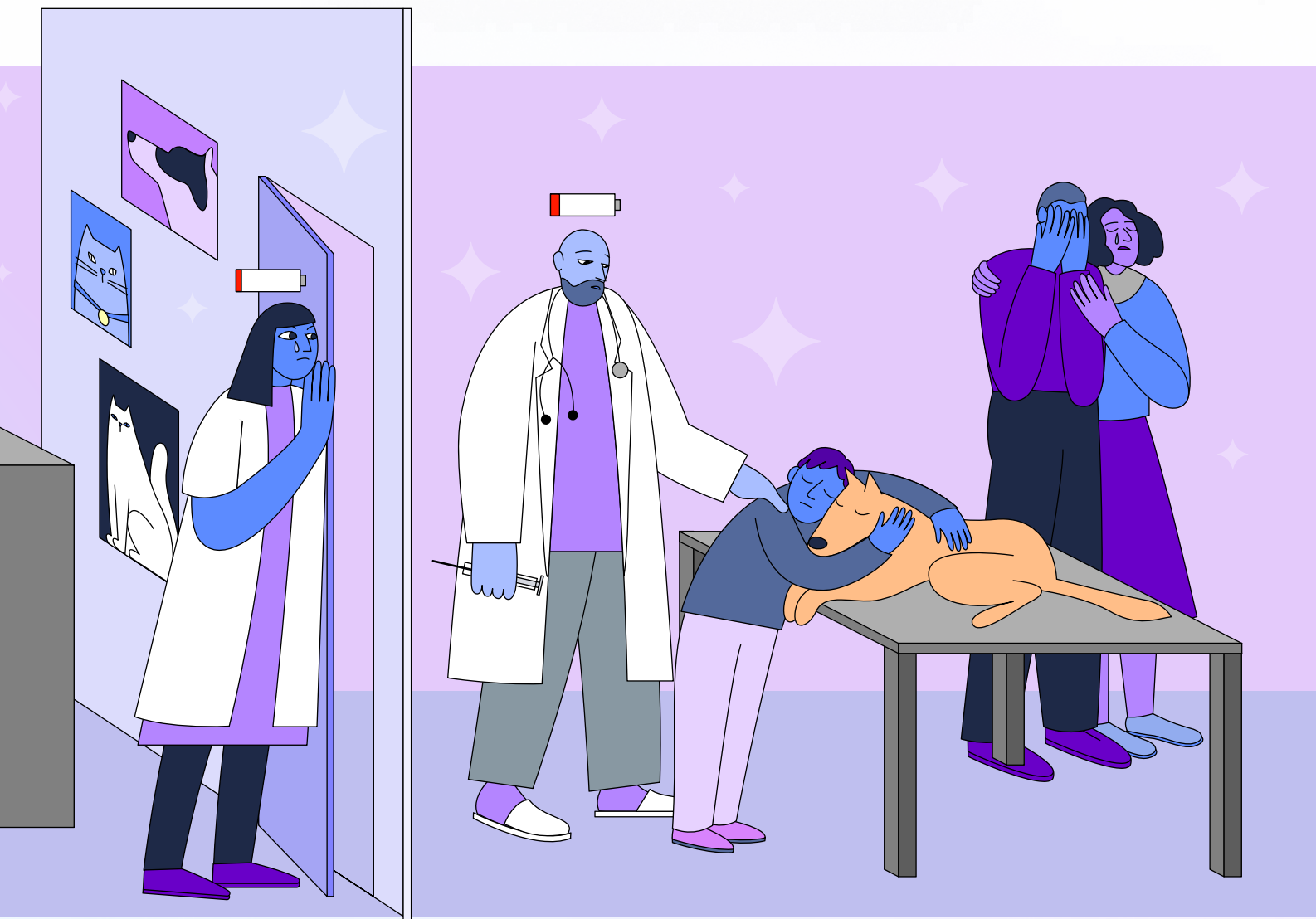


# **Veterinary Burnout Study:**

## *The Emotional Toll of Financial Stress, Work Environment, and Euthanasia*



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## FOREWORD

This is our third annual Burnout Study that assesses the state of mental well-being in the veterinary profession and looks for insights that can help systemically address burnout, prevent talent drain in our industry, and create happier environments for healthcare teams. This year's survey included open-ended questions to capture even more sentiment from the industry.

A growing body of research, including findings from this paper, suggests that burnout is largely triggered by workplace and management issues. It is hard to prevent on an individual level, simply by applying self-care techniques, behavioral strategies, or resilience skill-building, if the unhealthy workplace culture continues. Lack of control and autonomy, insufficient reward, unfair treatment, excessive workload and inefficient processes, low social support, moral dilemmas, and conflict of values are the major causes of burnout. It's leadership's responsibility to tackle them on an organizational level.



### **DR. IVAN ZAK**

DVM, MBA, CEO, GALAXY VETS

In this year's study, we looked into the economic welfare and compensation satisfaction of veterinary professionals and how financial freedom relates to burnout. We also analyzed the influence of feedback and having a support environment on the emotional well-being of employees. It was worrying to discover how many practices lacked stress management support systems.

We found that an overwhelming majority of veterinary professionals didn't feel support from their peers, nor from supervisors or hospital owners. Not being heard had a direct correlation with the burnout rate.

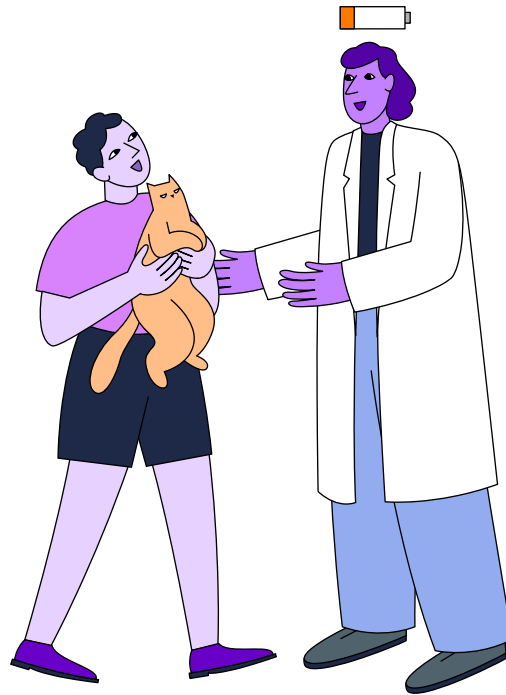
One key discovery was how many practitioners would like to have the option to work remotely. While the majority of respondents, naturally, prefer treating animals in person, a large segment of younger professionals and female professionals indicated they would prefer a hybrid work arrangement. This suggests an opportunity for wider adoption of telehealth, not just as a means to provide pet owners continuous access to care, but also as a way to offer more flexibility and task variety to the veterinary teams.

Finally, we took a close look at how euthanasia procedures correlate with burnout, especially when they are performed for economic reasons.

The evidence we found supported our hypothesis that having to resort to euthanasia due to clients having insufficient funds while there is a viable medical alternative, is one of the most devastating emotional experiences that veterinarians and their teams undergo routinely. It is an under-studied and under-discussed issue that is traumatic both for pet owners and healthcare teams, urging the industry to address the issue of veterinary care accessibility.

I hope that our research will help veterinary leaders better understand their teams and adopt workflows, policies, and training that will drive employee happiness.





## INTRODUCTION

Have you felt physically or emotionally exhausted at work? Do you feel less enthusiastic about doing things at work that you used to enjoy? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you’re not alone. A growing number of professionals, including veterinary professionals have reported feeling burnout on their job. Although burnout is not a new concept and has been researched extensively (Deery et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2015; Maslach & Leiter, 2008), including within the veterinary industry (Mastenbroek et al., 2014; Pohl et al., 2022), it has become even more of a central topic, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It radically shifted the way people work and engage with one another due, among other reasons, to the radical shift from in-person to remote work as well as the uncertainty and stress of dealing with a pandemic (Charney et al., 2020; Dye et al., 2020). Veterinary practices, considered essential businesses, had to implement new workflows, such as curbside care, exacerbating the inefficiencies, workload, and stress (Caney et al., 2022; Osborne, 2021).

Burnout has been recognized as an occupational disease that is taking a heavy social and economic toll on the veterinary profession (Pohl et al., 2022). For example, a recent study estimated that the cost of burnout among veterinarians in the US is between \$1 and 2 billion in lost revenue annually (Neill et al., 2022).

Understanding the need to examine the drivers behind burnout among veterinary professionals, we at Galaxy Vets have prioritized research that investigates and illuminates potential levers that can contribute to burnout among veterinary personnel. Previous research has identified different drivers of burnout, including compassion fatigue, heavy workload, and team conflict (Ashton-James & McNeillage, 2022). Another contributor that can impact burnout is euthanasia. Research has shown that routinely performing euthanasia has been linked to distress, sadness, and fatigue (Hannah & Robertson, 2021; Newsome et al., 2019). In fact, Hannah and Robertson (2021) provide detailed accounts of the emotional responses and thought processes of veterinary staff who perform euthanasia, highlighting the challenging cases, including situations where the owners drop off their pets to be euthanized, leaving the burden to comfort the animal at the end of its life to the healthcare team.





However, not much is known regarding how euthanasia practices can affect the mental well-being of veterinary professionals. Different studies show mixed results. One study, for example, showed that performing euthanasia could serve as a protective factor, such that higher frequencies of euthanasia performed reduced the suicide risk (Tran et al., 2014) whereas, other studies have shown the exact opposite, showing high suicide rates among veterinary professionals who perform euthanasia (Bartram & Baldwin, 2010). In this study, we focus particularly on economic euthanasia.

The study was approved by the Social, Behavioral & Educational Research Institutional Review Board (SBER IRB) of the Tufts University, Boston, Massachusetts.

In this white paper, we explore burnout among veterinary professionals, delving into how various factors influence the level of burnout they experience and providing actionable recommendations based on our findings. The paper is organized in the following way: a section detailing the study logistics and methodology, followed by the results section that highlights key findings and a recommendations section in which we provide tangible ways to improve the experience for your staff.



## METHODS

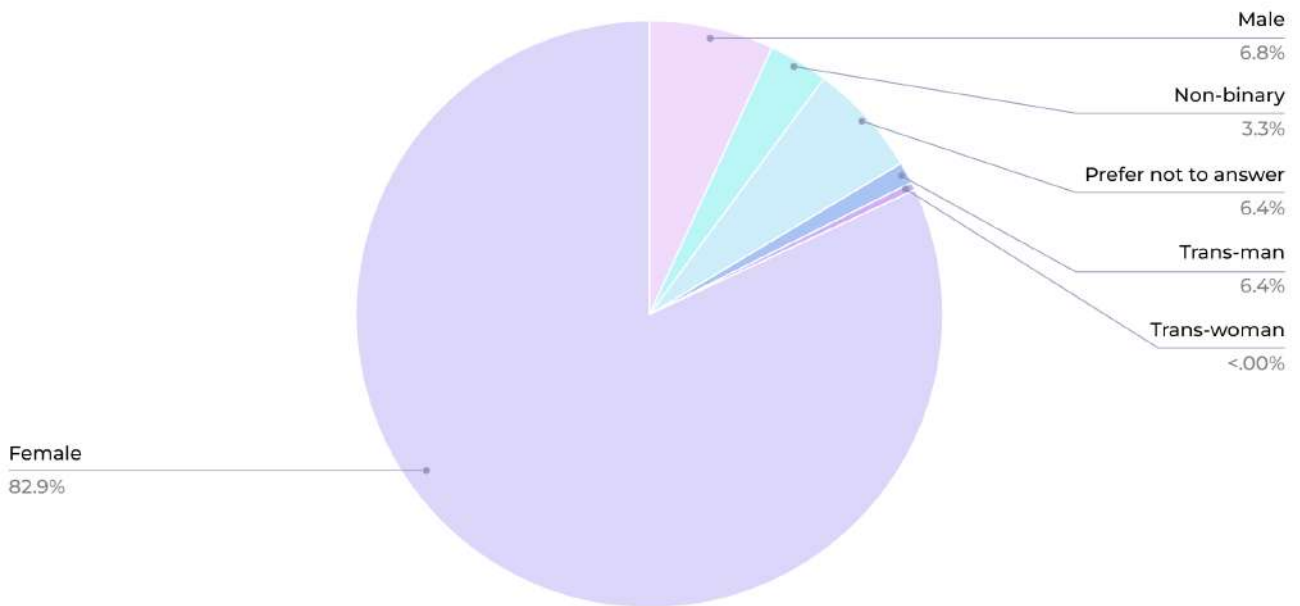
### DESIGN

The study used online survey methodology, in which participants were sent a link to the survey that was created and hosted on Qualtrics. The survey was distributed to Galaxy Vet's global network of veterinary professionals that included veterinarians, veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants, practice managers, and customer service representatives (CSRs). The survey contained an introduction letter briefly describing the purpose of the survey. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that their responses would be aggregated to ensure their confidentiality. Data collection spanned a total of six weeks, lasting from the end of September to early November, 2022.

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 2,970 responses were recorded of which 1,942 were complete responses (i.e., survey taker answered all questions from start to finish), yielding a 65.3% completion rate.

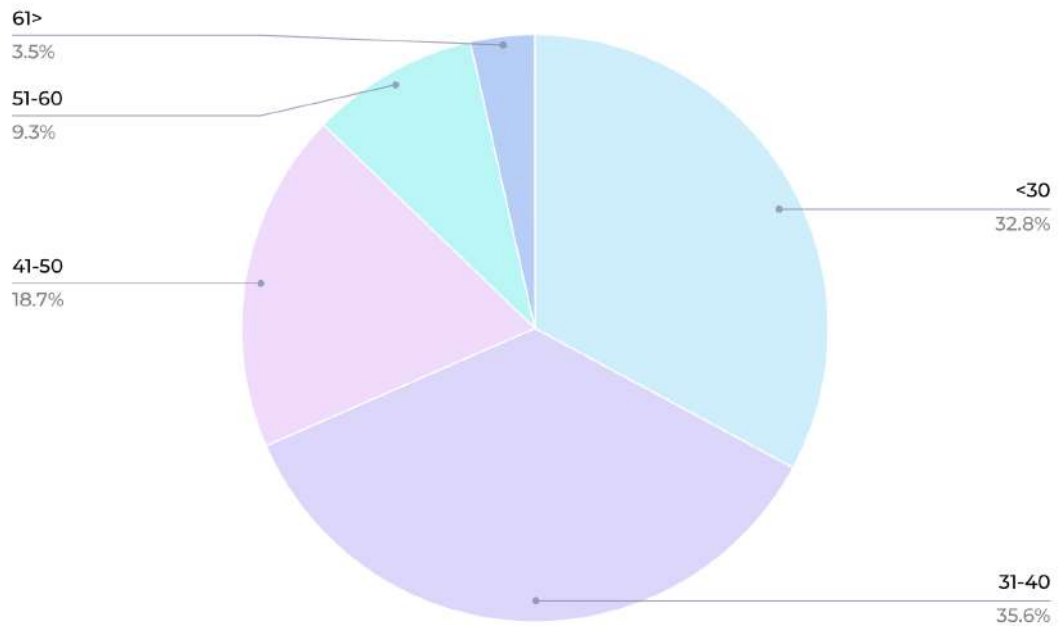
Participant breakdown by gender identity



The majority of participants (82.9%) identified as female which is consistent with the general state of the veterinary workforce. 6.8% of respondents identified as male and nearly 4% reported non-binary or transgender.

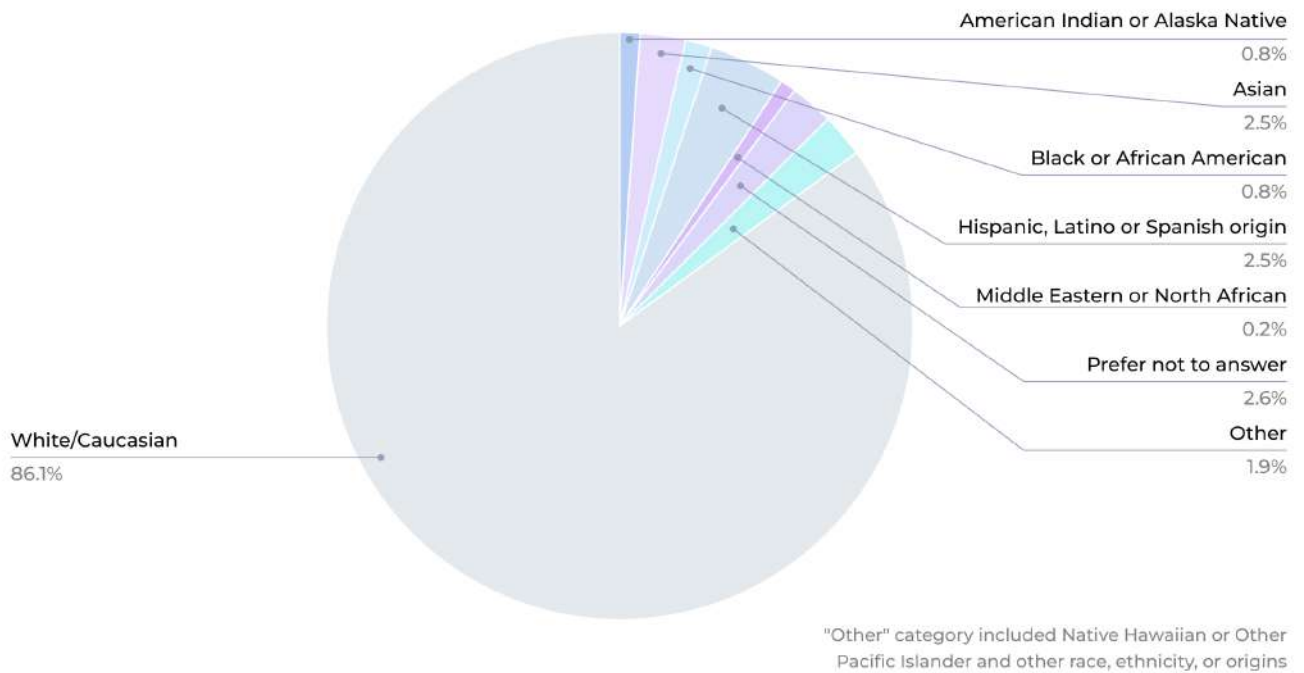


Participant breakdown by age

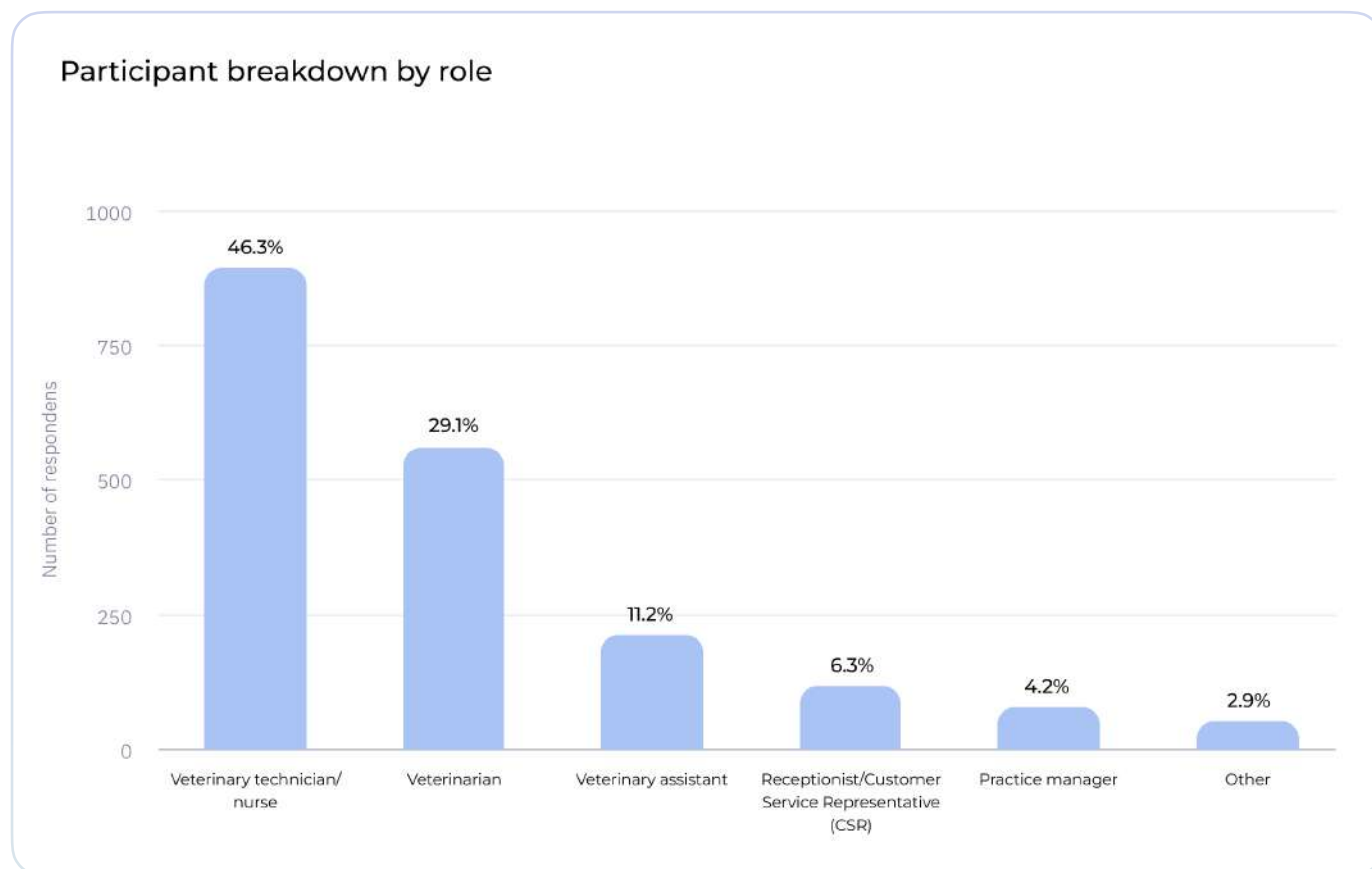


About 68.4% of the participants were aged 40 or under and the average work experience was 11.9 years. The greatest number of participants was ages 31-40 (35.6%). The smallest number of participants was older than 60 (3.5%).

Which racial background best describes you?

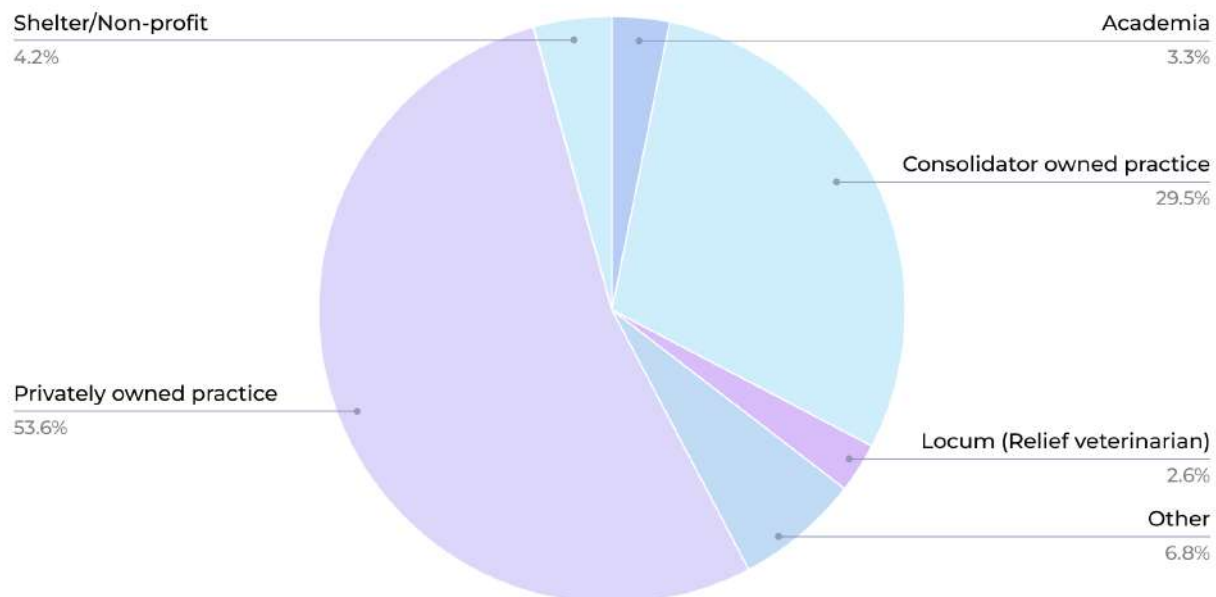


Participants were 86.1% White, 0.8% Black or African American, 5.1% Latinx, and 2.5% Asian.



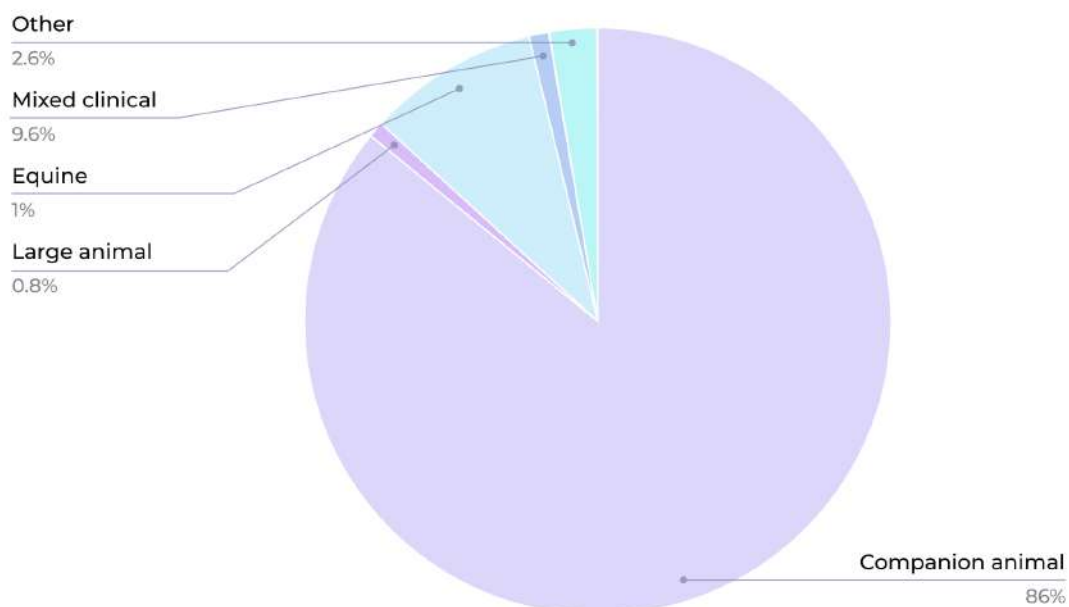
It was also critical to determine the role of the participants in the study. The survey collected a sample representing as many staff positions as possible: veterinarians, veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants, practice managers, and CSRs. The majority of the participants (46.3%) were veterinary technicians. Veterinarians constituted 29.1% of respondents and 11.2% were veterinary assistants. Other roles included practice managers and CSRs, which allowed us to shed a light on the degree of burnout across different hospital populations.

### What practice setting are you working in?



The study identified the type of hospital setting that participants were working in to compare the degree of burnout between professionals working in different environments. The majority of participants worked in privately-owned practices (53.6%) and 29.5% of respondents worked in a corporate setting. Other types of employment included shelter/non-profit medicine, academia, and relief workers.

Which category best describes your practice?

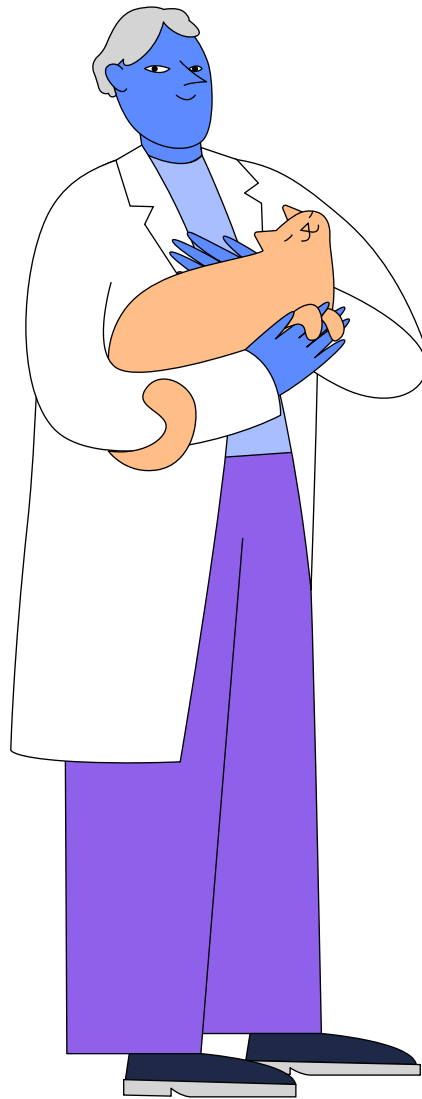


86% of the respondents treated companion animals, the second largest category were practitioners from mixed-animal hospitals. A small percentage included large animal, equine, and other types of practices. See Table X for description of the survey respondents.



Table X. Description of survey respondents

	Count (%)		Count (%)
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Practice Setting</b>	
Female	1,609 (82.9%)	Privately owned	1,041 (53.6%)
Male	131 (6.8%)	Consolidator owned (corporate)	572 (29.5%)
Trans-woman	1 (<.00%)	Academia	65 (3.3%)
Trans-man	12 (.6%)	Locum/relief vet	51 (2.6%)
Non-binary	65 (3.3%)	Shelter/non-profit	82 (4.2%)
Prefer not to answer	124 (6.4%)	Other	131 (6.8%)
<b>Race</b>		<b>Practice Type</b>	
White	1,672 (86.1%)	Companion animal	1,670 (86.0%)
Latinx	99 (5.1%)	Mixed	187 (9.6%)
Black	16 (.8%)	Large animal	15 (.8%)
Asian	48 (2.5%)	Equine	19 (1.0%)
American Indian	15 (.8%)	Other	51 (2.6%)
Middle Eastern	4 (.2%)	<b>Roles</b>	
Other	37 (1.9%)	Veterinarian	565 (29.1%)
Prefer not to answer	51 (2.6%)	Veterinary tech/nurse	900 (46.3%)
<b>Age</b>		Practice manager	82 (4.2%)
<30	637 (32.8%)	Veterinary assistant	218 (11.2%)
31-40	692 (35.6%)	Receptionist	122 (6.3%)
41-50	364 (18.7%)	Other	55 (2.9%)
51-60	181 (9.4%)		
61+	68 (3.5%)		



## MEASUREMENTS

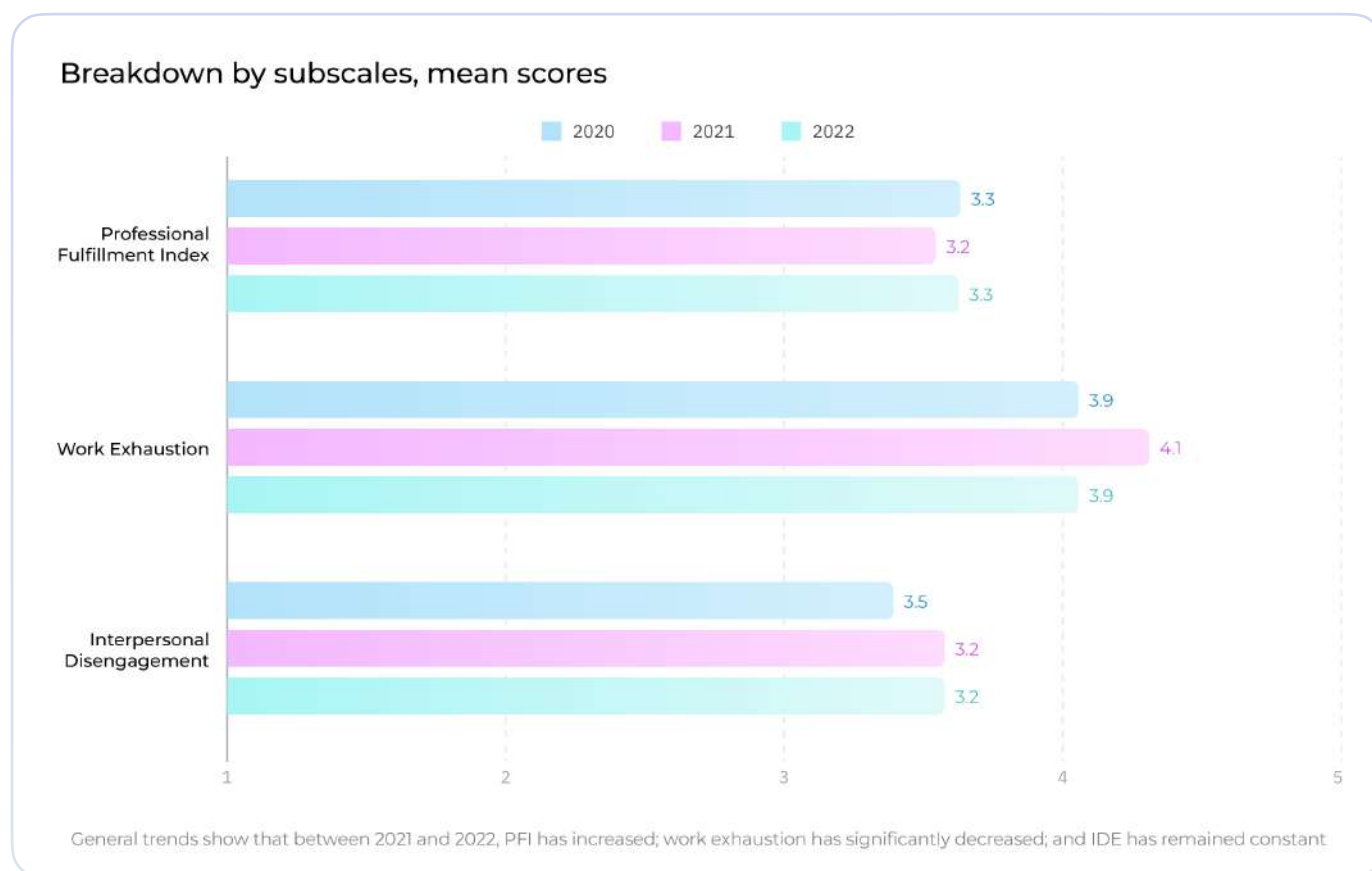
The study team used Professional Fulfillment Index, a validated 16-item scale comprised of three subscales: professional fulfillment (6 items), work exhaustion (4 items), and interpersonal disengagement (6 items) (Trockel et al., 2018). Burnout was measured by averaging the 10 items from the work exhaustion and interpersonal disengagement scales. Sample items for burnout include, “I feel a sense of dread when I think about the work I have to do,” and “I feel physically exhausted at work.”

## KEY FINDINGS

### BURNOUT RETURNED TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVEL

The 2021 study revealed a significant spike in burnout level compared to 2020, which can be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent complications for veterinary healthcare delivery and psychological distress for the veterinary teams. However, between 2021-2022, burnout rates decreased, returning to what they were in 2020.

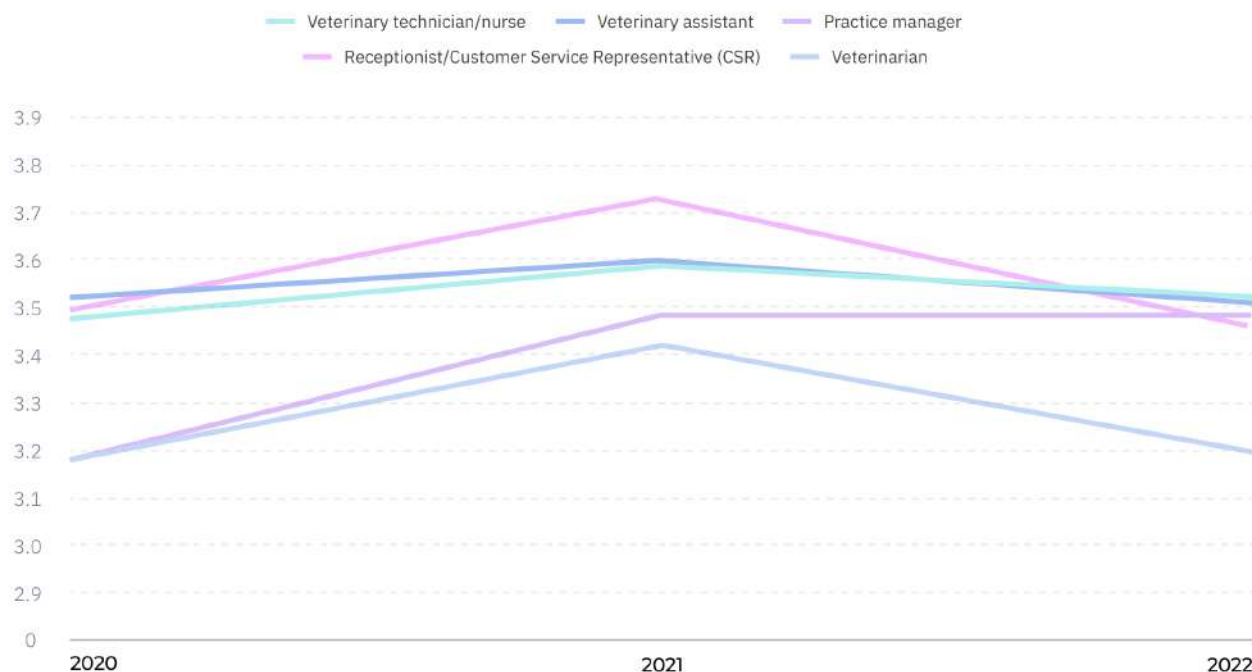




## PRACTICE MANAGERS, CSRS, ASSISTANTS AND TECHNICIANS REPORT HIGHEST BURNOUT RATES

Trends from the data suggest that between 2020-2021, burnout rates increased across all roles, including veterinarians, and then rolled back in 2022. The only group whose burnout rate increased and remained high relative to everyone else in 2022 were practice managers, highlighting a group that may require special attention.

### Burnout by role, mean scores



The only group whose burnout rate increased and continued to stay high were practice managers

Staff members reported the highest burnout rate, followed by associate veterinarians. The lowest burnout rate was among practice owners.

The most impactful thing my employer can do would be to provide more support when we are short-staffed. Cross-training employees, having locum staff available, hiring more part-timers

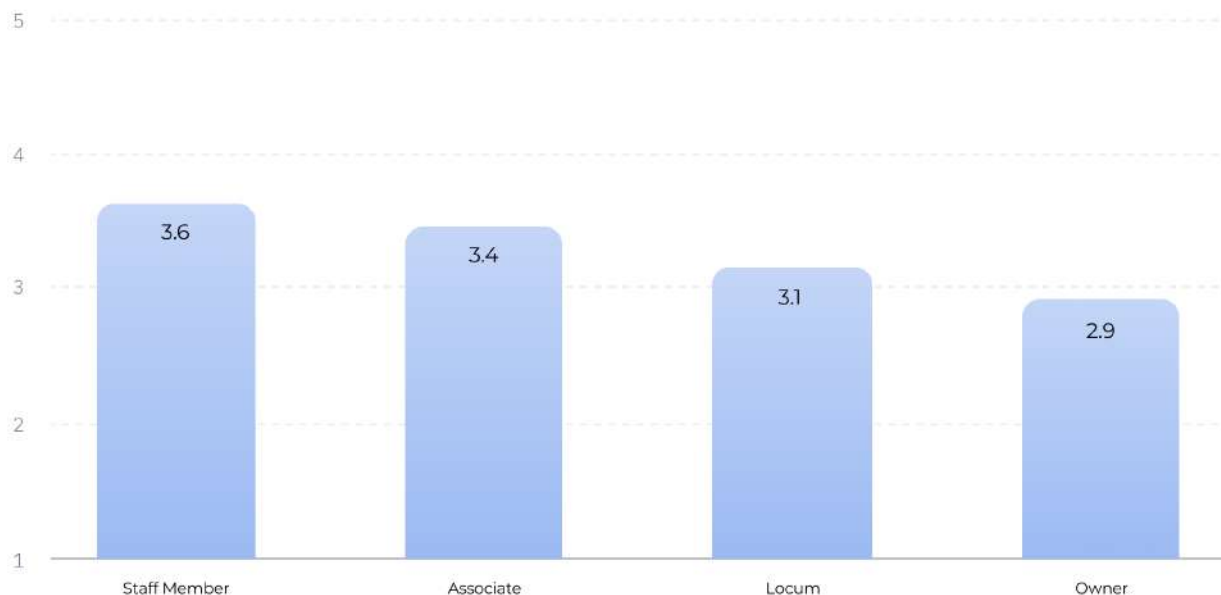
CSR

We are held responsible for the entire well-being of our clinic, but barely paid more than our nursing staff

Practice manager



Burnout rate by position, mean scores



Burnout was lowest among those who owned their own practice; support staff reported the highest level of burnout

The study did not reveal a significant difference in burnout rates among employees of privately-owned and consolidator-owned (corporate practices). Locum (relief) workers were the only group who showed a significantly lower level of burnout compared to respondents with other types of employment. There was also no significant difference between practice categories (small animal, large animal, equine, etc.).

Recognize that just because we aren't credentialed, it doesn't mean that receptionists and assistants don't get the brunt of the abuse from clients. We are equally as burnt out and depressed

CSR

WOMEN AND LESS-EXPERIENCED VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS REPORT HIGHEST BURNOUT

Similar to previous findings on burnout among veterinarians (Mastenbroek et al., 2014), our study, which included burnout data gathered from 2020 to 2022, showed that women and younger veterinary professionals reported the highest levels of burnout. Specifically, women reported higher burnout than men, and veterinary professionals in the 40 or under age group reported higher burnout than older groups<sup>1</sup>.

Table X. Description of survey respondents

Year	Women	Men
2020	N/A	N/A
2021	3.6	3.1
2022	3.5	3.1

Table X. Burnout by age group

Year	<30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61>
2020	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.0	2.5
2021	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.4	2.9
2022	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.0	2.7

<sup>1</sup> In the survey, we included the following options from which participants could choose: cis-woman; cis-man; trans-woman; trans-man; non-binary/non-conforming; and prefer not to answer. Compared to the sample size for cis-gender, the sample size for the other gender identities were much smaller, precluding any form of robust statistical analyses. Hence the analysis focused on responses from cis-gender respondents.

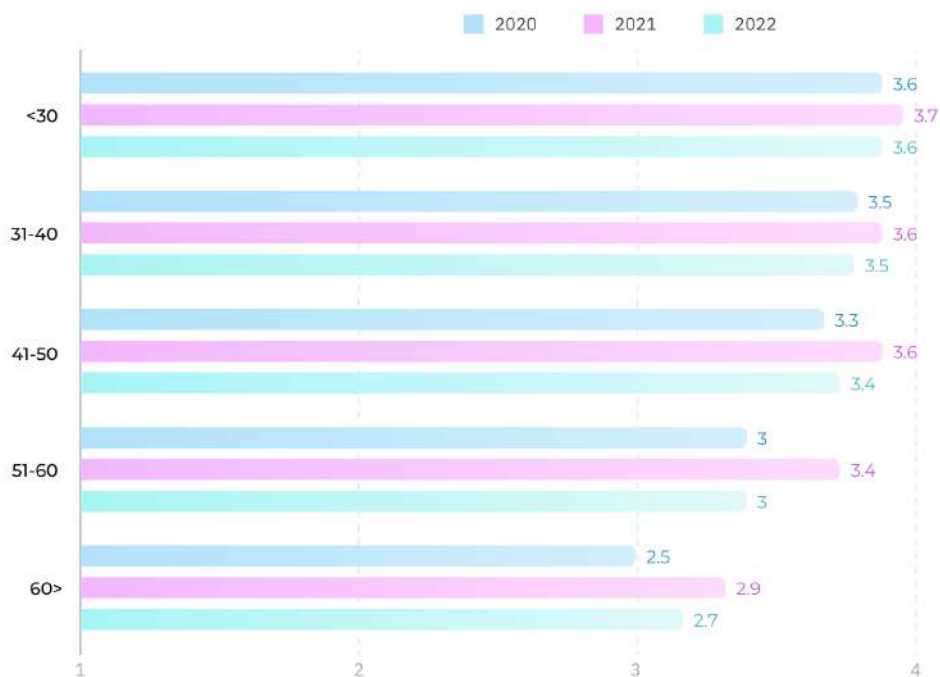


Furthermore, results showed that there was a negative relationship between burnout and work experience. More work experience was associated with less burnout and vice-versa. This trend suggests that more experienced veterinary professionals who are further along in their careers may be better equipped to handle the challenges associated with their job than their younger, less-experienced counterparts. In addition, younger vets are more likely to have larger student loans than those who are older. Given the rising cost of tuition, particularly in the U.S., this may also contribute to higher burnout rates among younger vets.

Improve a work-life balance for full-time staff (offer flexible days for when kids are sick)

*Practice manager*

### Burnout rate by age group, mean scores



Veterinary professionals in the 40 or under group consistently report higher burnout than older groups

Give me opportunities and improve the workflow in the clinic

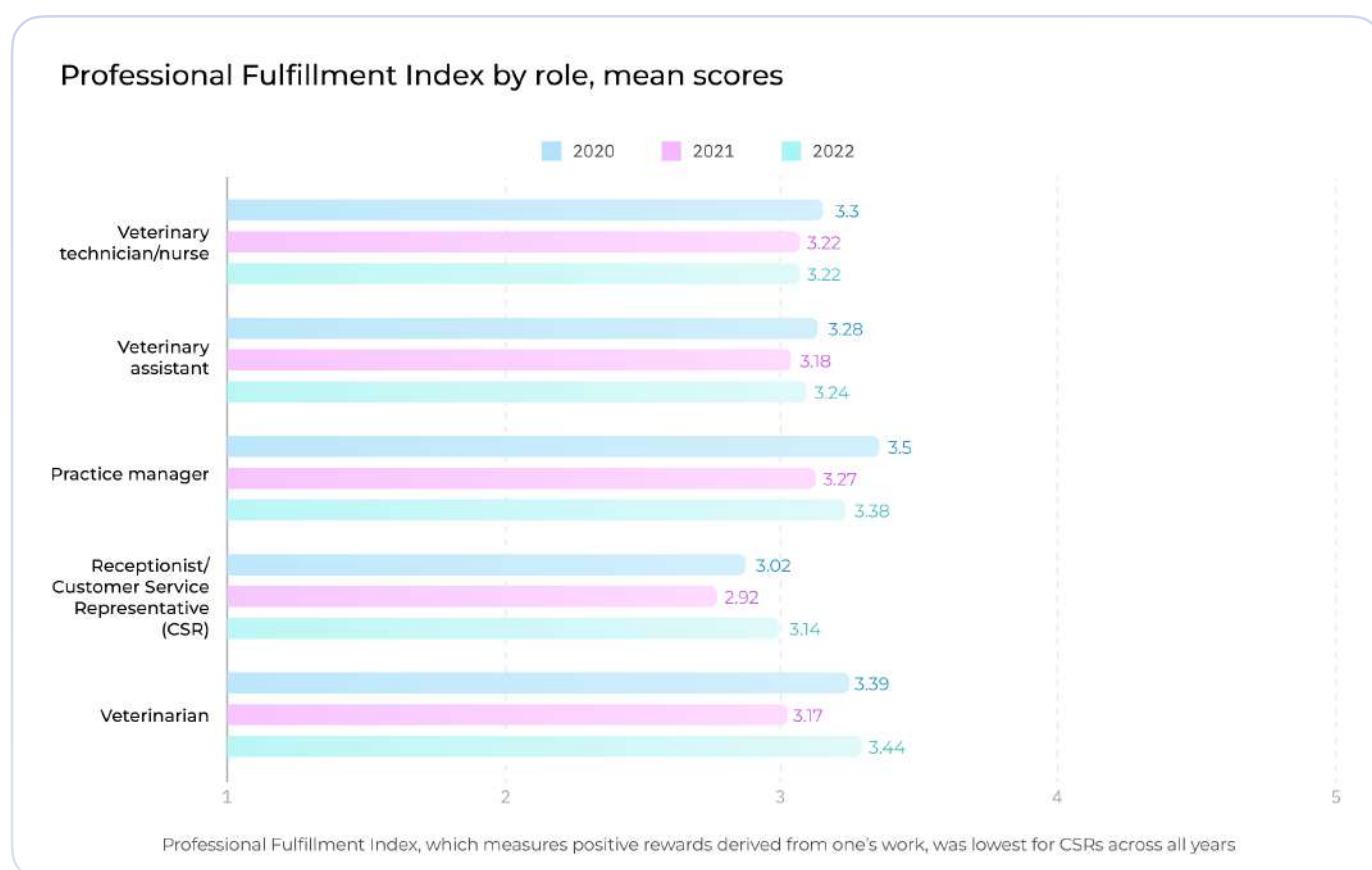
*Veterinary technician*

My younger generation of new grad vets and I have been called 'whiny' for pushing for changes in the industry. This is contributing to toxicity and burnout

*Veterinarian*

## PROFESSIONAL FULFILLMENT INDEX WAS LOWEST FOR CSRS ACROSS ALL YEARS

The Professional Fulfillment Index (PFI), which measures positive rewards derived from one's work, was lowest for CSRs across all years. Between 2020 and 2022, veterinarians were the only ones who showed a significant change in PFI. Specifically, their PFI decreased between 2020 and 2021 (M = 3.4 to 3.2) but increased from 2021 to 2022 (3.2 to 3.4). CSRs reported the lowest PFI, potentially highlighting challenges and frustration related to their role ambiguity and typical lack of recognition and career growth opportunities compared to other positions in a hospital.





Management needs to be leaders instead of bosses. My manager cannot do my job, does not listen or support. They focus only on negative feedback and rarely compliment

CSR

## PROFESSIONALS WHO FEEL LESS FINANCIALLY STABLE REPORTED HIGHER BURNOUT

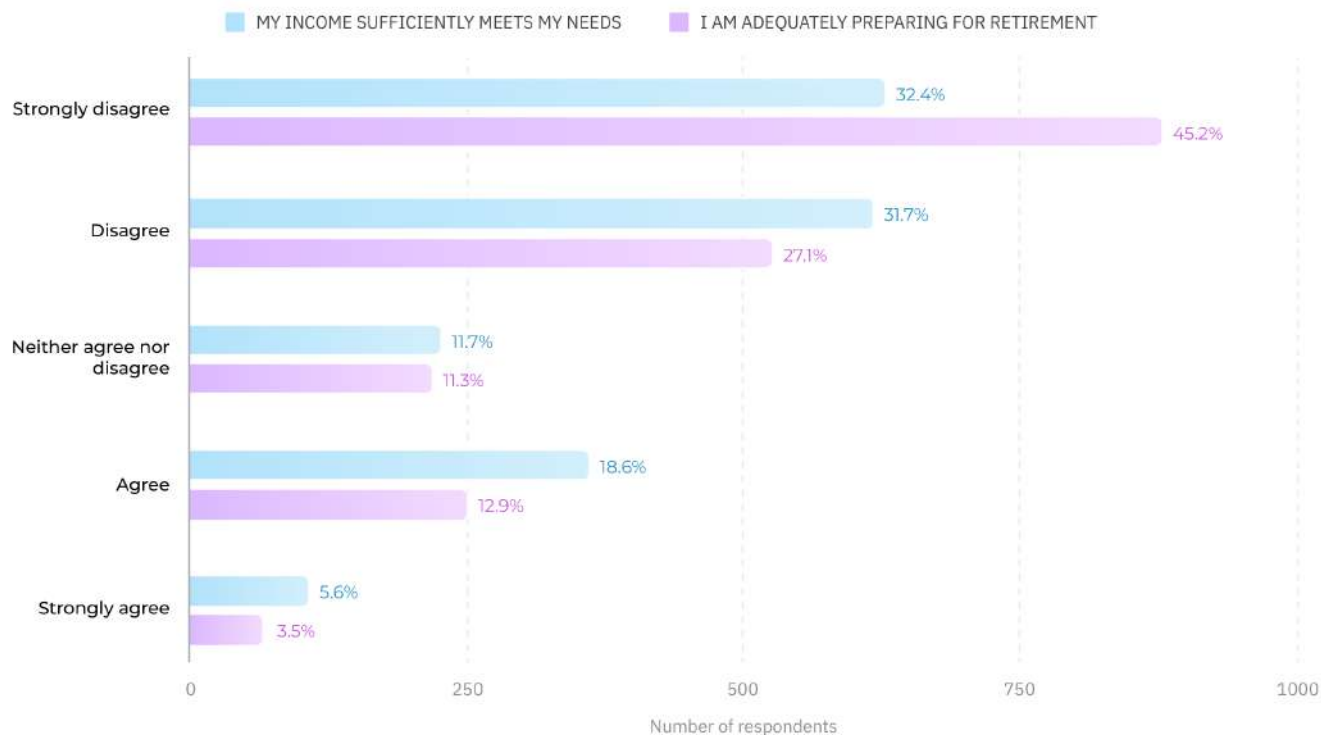
Another goal was to investigate whether veterinary professionals feel financially secure and how it is related to burnout. 64% of respondents reported that their income didn't sufficiently meet their needs; 72% of respondents didn't feel adequately prepared for retirement.

Analysis showed that those who felt less financially stable were also more likely to report higher burnout than those who felt more financially stable. Specifically, those who shared that they don't feel that their income is matching their needs and that they do not feel like they are adequately preparing for retirement were more likely to feel burned out. This result was similar across all roles.

Improve financial compensation and/or allow me to become a partial owner

*Veterinary technician*

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the statements below



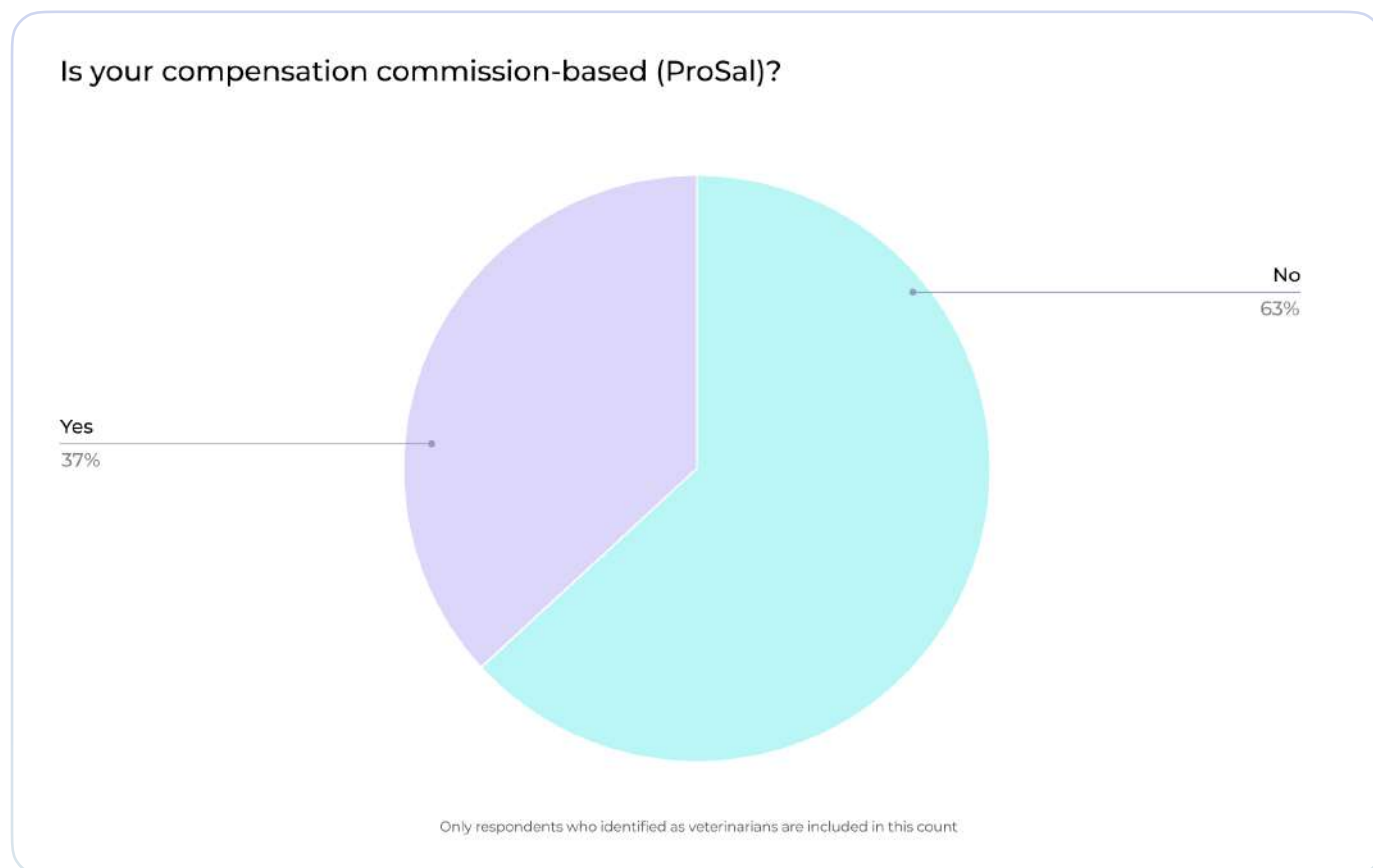
Appreciate all my hard work. Thank you goes a long way. Understand mental health better

*Practice manager*

Increase wages. I and other staff members I've spoken to are very underpaid. We're constantly being asked to take more responsibility and to work on projects at home with no additional pay

*Veterinary technician*

Separately, we asked veterinarians about their compensation model (commission-based vs. salary only) to understand if it has any impact on their well-being.



While their burnout level was similar further analysis revealed a significant difference in the financial well-being of those two groups. Veterinarians who were commissioned reported higher scores for both the question about financial security and the question about retirement. This finding suggests that veterinarians whose compensation depends on production feel more financially stable and more secure about their retirement.

Find relief vets for time off

*Veterinarian*

On the flip side, several respondents indicated they would like to switch from commission-based compensation to salary only and that taking vacations had a negative impact on their pay. This feedback, while not representative, highlights a downside of a production model that can potentially push DVMs to generate revenue, multi-task, and work at a faster pace, oftentimes, at the expense of breaks during the day or even vacations. Another hypothesis is that it can create a feeling of unfairness among the support staff because extra work doesn't yield additional income for them.

This finding suggests that more research is needed to learn what compensation models would be most beneficial to mental health, teamwork, and motivation. Potentially, having more control over one's finances and seeing a direct correlation between effort and reward has a positive impact on one's well-being, and it is worth exploring further how profit-sharing models can be applied to all roles in a hospital.

Finally, 51% of respondents admitted that it was hard for them to take time off or vacations. This group revealed higher burnout rates, suggesting that a lack of work-life balance could be a contributor to burnout. For men, however, there was no relationship between burnout and being able to take time off.

Better protect my time such as making sure I leave on time, have breaks, get to eat, and have time to use the restroom without waiting hours so I can catch up

*Veterinary technician*

Allow more flexibility as to when vacations can be taken

*Veterinarian*

### Compensation model and financial security



Hire a cleaning crew!! We are medical professionals that should be able to go home at the end of our shift

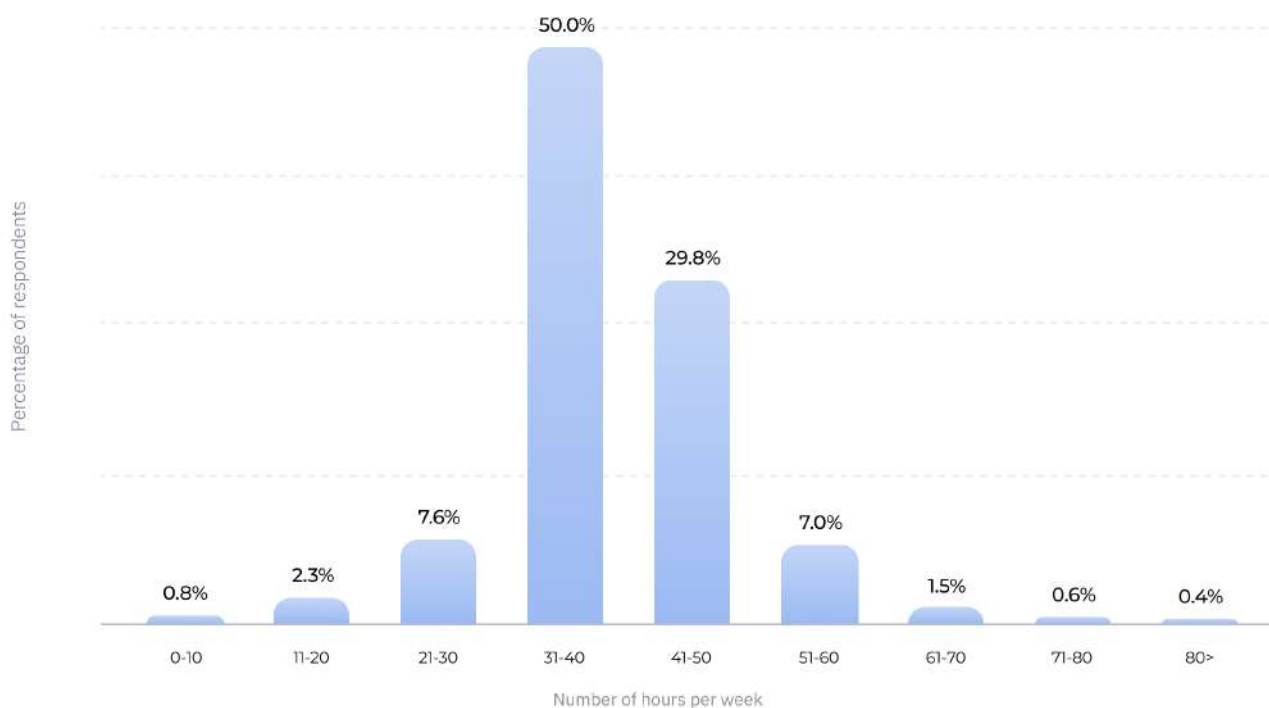
*Veterinary technician*

If someone shows up at 1 minute before closing no matter if there's already 6 doctor files waiting, we'll take it in. Then we still have to clean, do treatments, and every staff member is required to wait until the clinic as a whole is finished

*Veterinary technician*

The majority of respondents (50%) worked up to 40 hours per week, although large groups reported working up to 50 and even 60 hours.

On average, how many hours do you work per week?



42.4% of respondents' caseload reached up to 20 patients per day; 21.7% saw up to 30 patients daily.

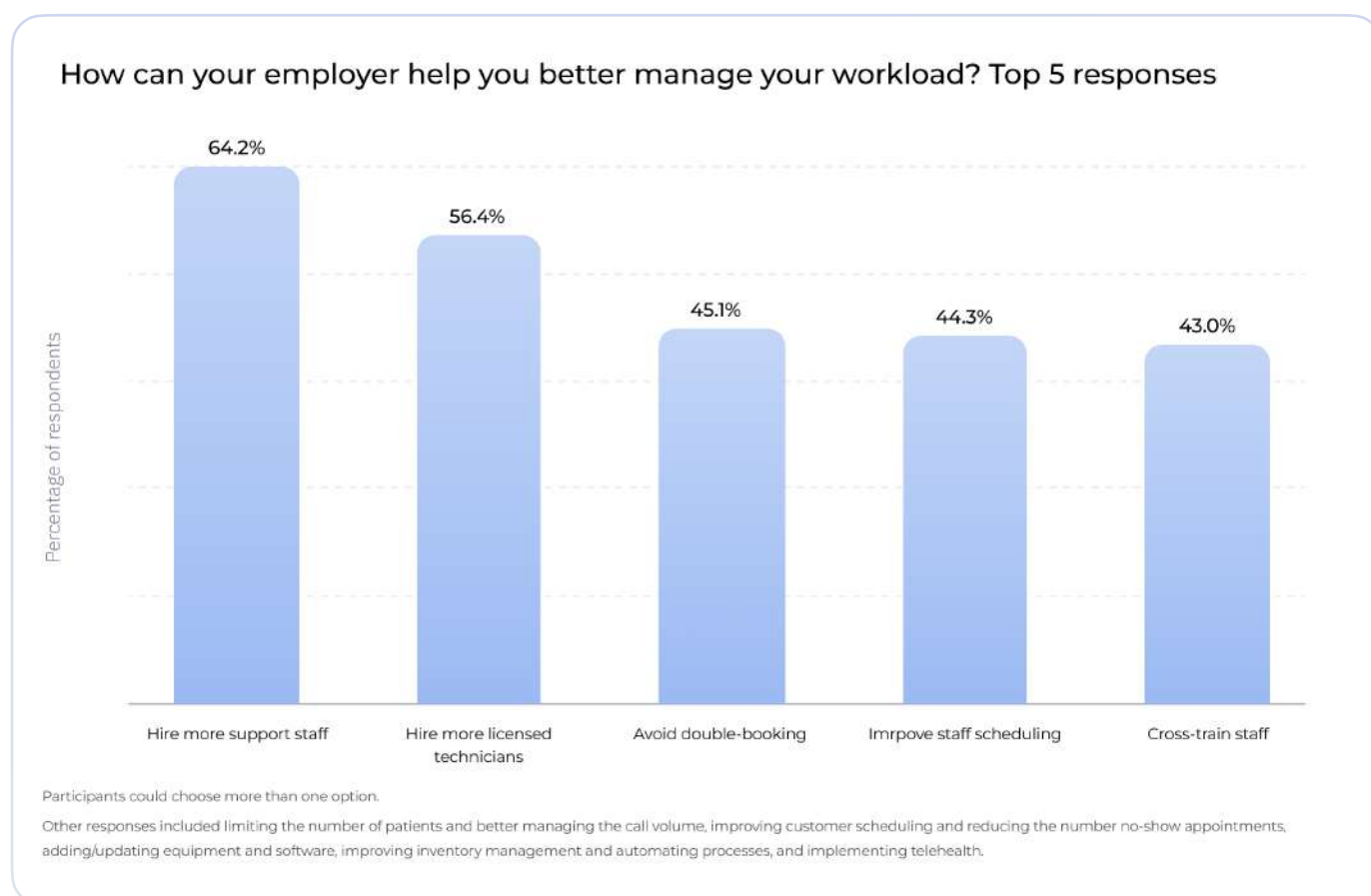
### On average, how many patients do you see each day?



Increase appointment times to take thorough notes and get records complete

*Veterinary technician*

When asked about ways employers can help their teams better manage the workload, the most popular responses included hiring more support staff and licensed veterinary technicians (64.2% and 56.4% respectively), as well as improving scheduling and cross-training staff. Other responses included limiting the number of patients and better managing the call volume, improving customer scheduling, reducing the number of no-show appointments, adding/updating equipment and software, improving inventory management, automating processes, and implementing telehealth.



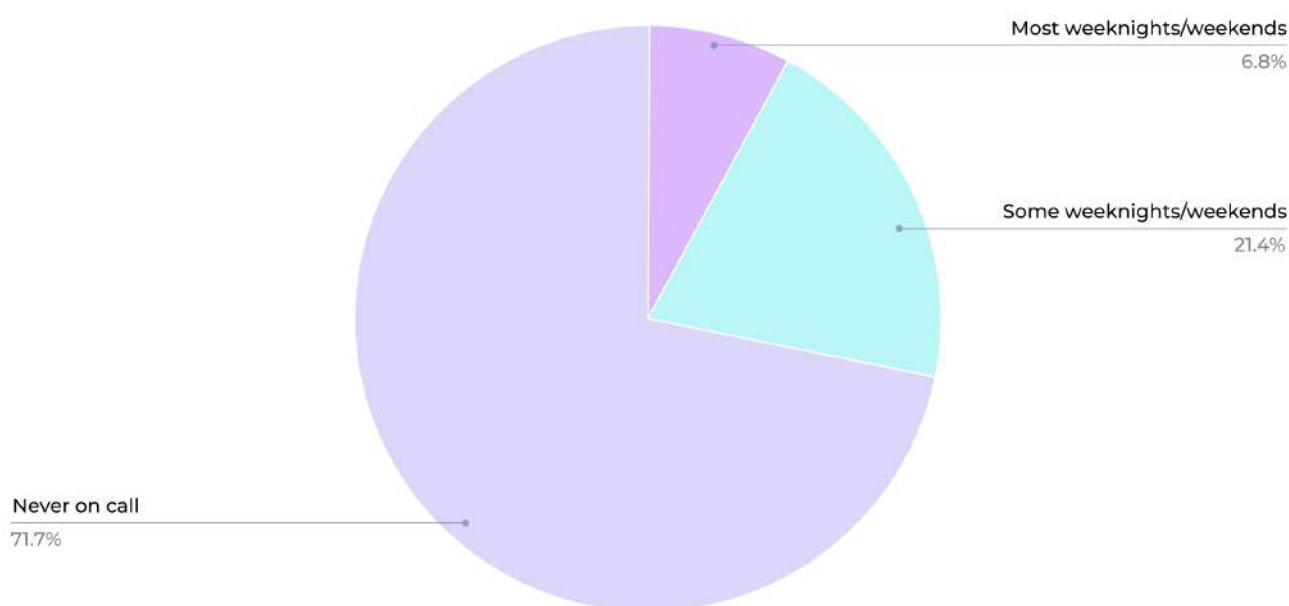
Comments from open-ended questions also suggested hiring more DVMs, creating more uniform policies, ensuring that everyone is following established procedures, more collaboration within the team, refusing walk-in non-emergencies, as well as firing bad clients and putting staff first. An overwhelming number of comments were made in regard to insufficient pay and lack of work-life balance.



## ON-CALL VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS ARE MORE BURNT-OUT

We studied the relationship between burnout and being on call. Almost every third respondent was required to be available at least five weeknights/weekends per month.

How often are you on call each month?

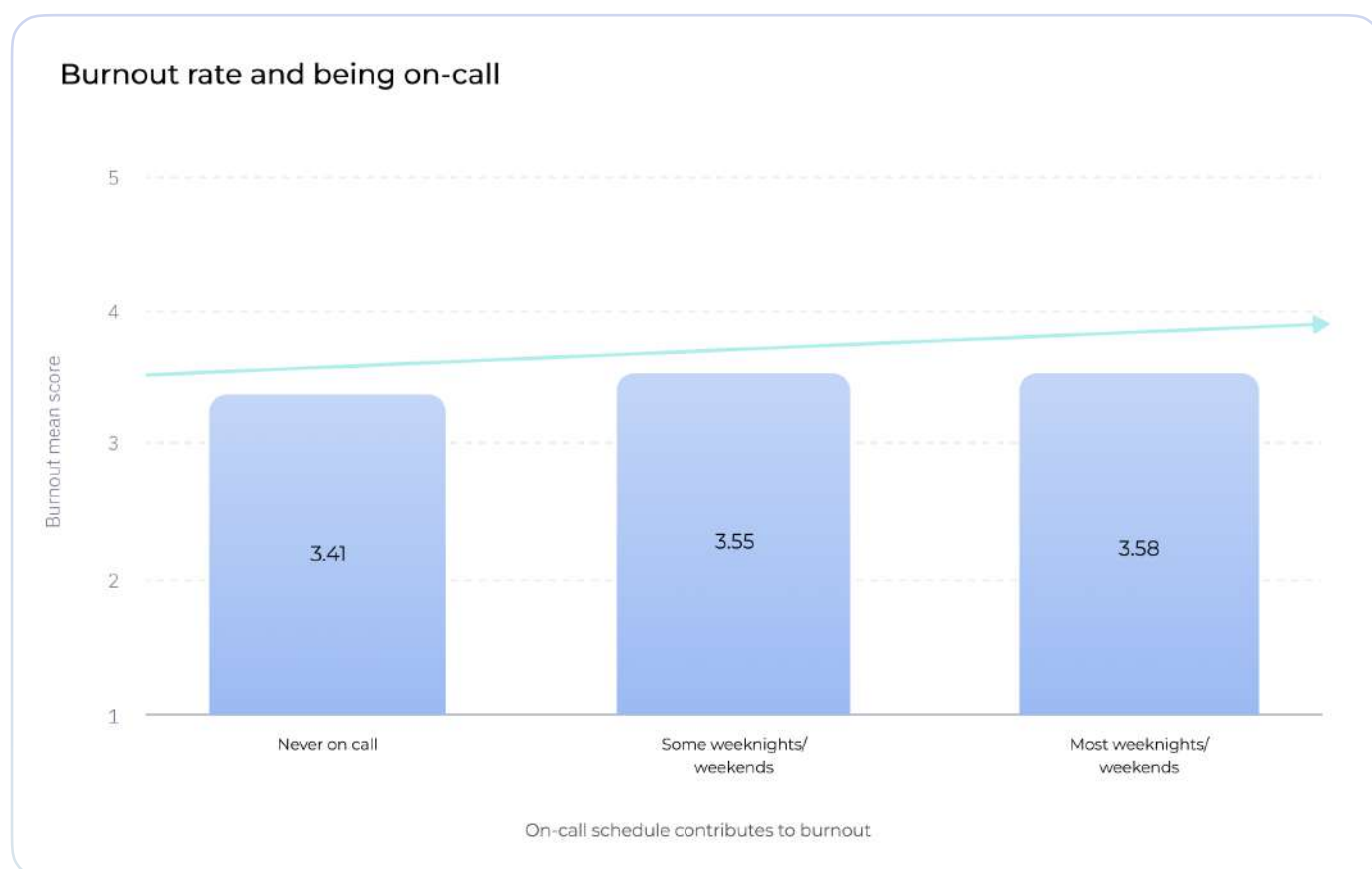


Most weeknights/weekends was considered more than 10 shifts per month. Some weeknights/weekends was considered 5-10 shifts per month.

Provide a better way to triage emergencies

*Veterinarian*

Veterinary professionals who were on call (defined as working weeknights and weekends), reported higher burnout than those who were not on call. Regardless of whether one was on call a few days a week ( $M = 3.6$ ) or on most days ( $M = 3.6$ ), those who worked on call reported higher burnout rates than professionals who were not on call ( $M = 3.4$ ).



Implement more efficient strategies for booking and staffing, start offering telehealth appointments

*Veterinarian*

Training staff better so they can handle clients' questions, etc. without bothering the vet

*Veterinarian*

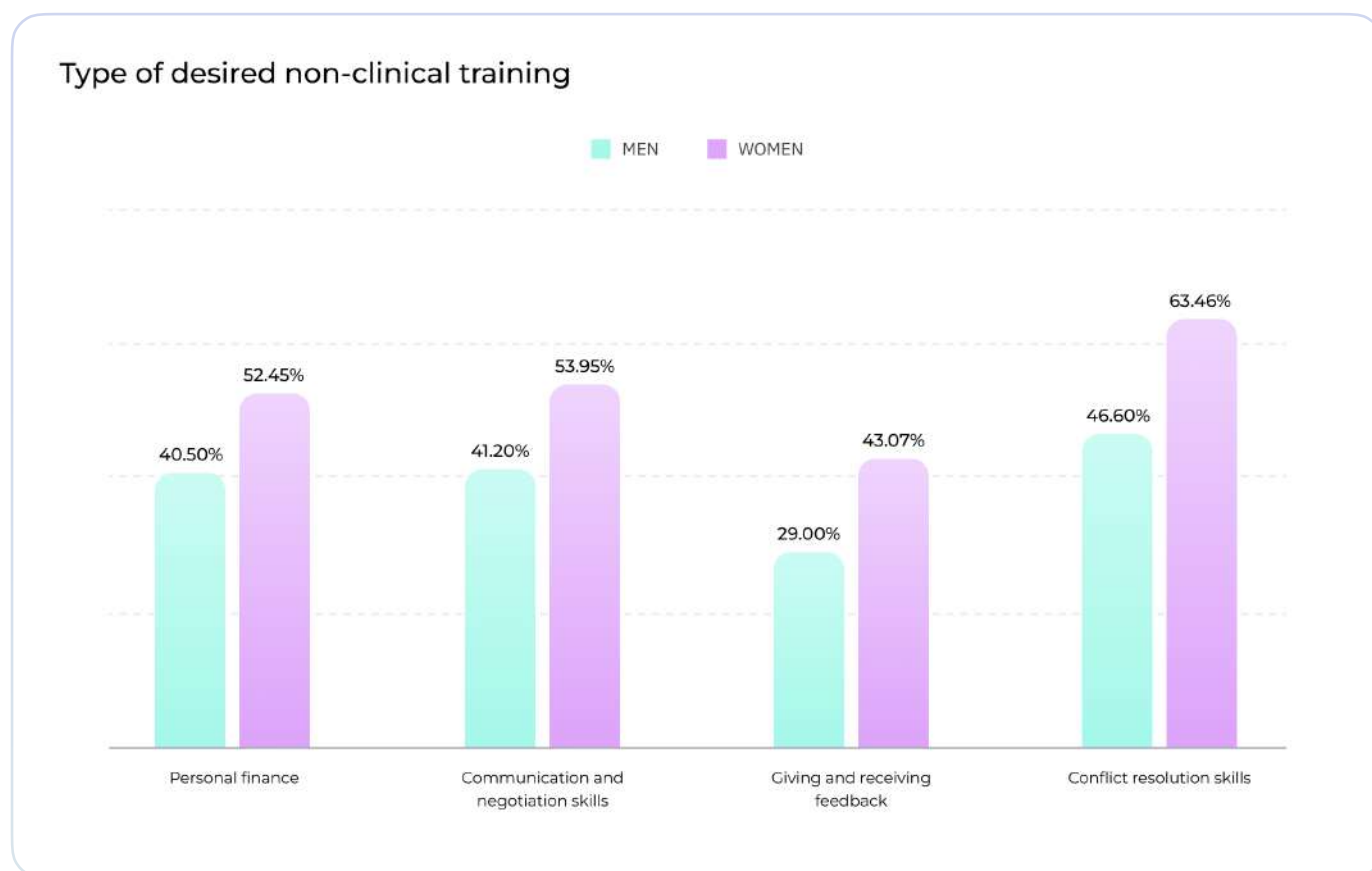
## STAFF TRAINING IS TOP OF MIND FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS

The survey asked respondents about the types of preferred employer-sponsored non-clinical employee development training. Options included receiving employee development training on the following topics: 1) personal finance; 2) communication and negotiation skills; 3) feedback giving; and 4) conflict resolution.

There were notable findings between women and men. While there were similarities between men and women in what employee development topics they were interested in pursuing, the majority of women ranked conflict resolution (63%), communication and negotiation (54%), and personal finance (53%) as their top areas of interest compared to 47%, 41% and 40% reported by men, respectively. This finding helps shed light on what employee development programs practice owners may want to offer their staff.

Have staff take CE on compassion fatigue, burnout, and how to notice certain signs with mental health. Also, brain chemistry and personality types to understand. Not everyone learns the same and processes everything equally

*Veterinary technician*

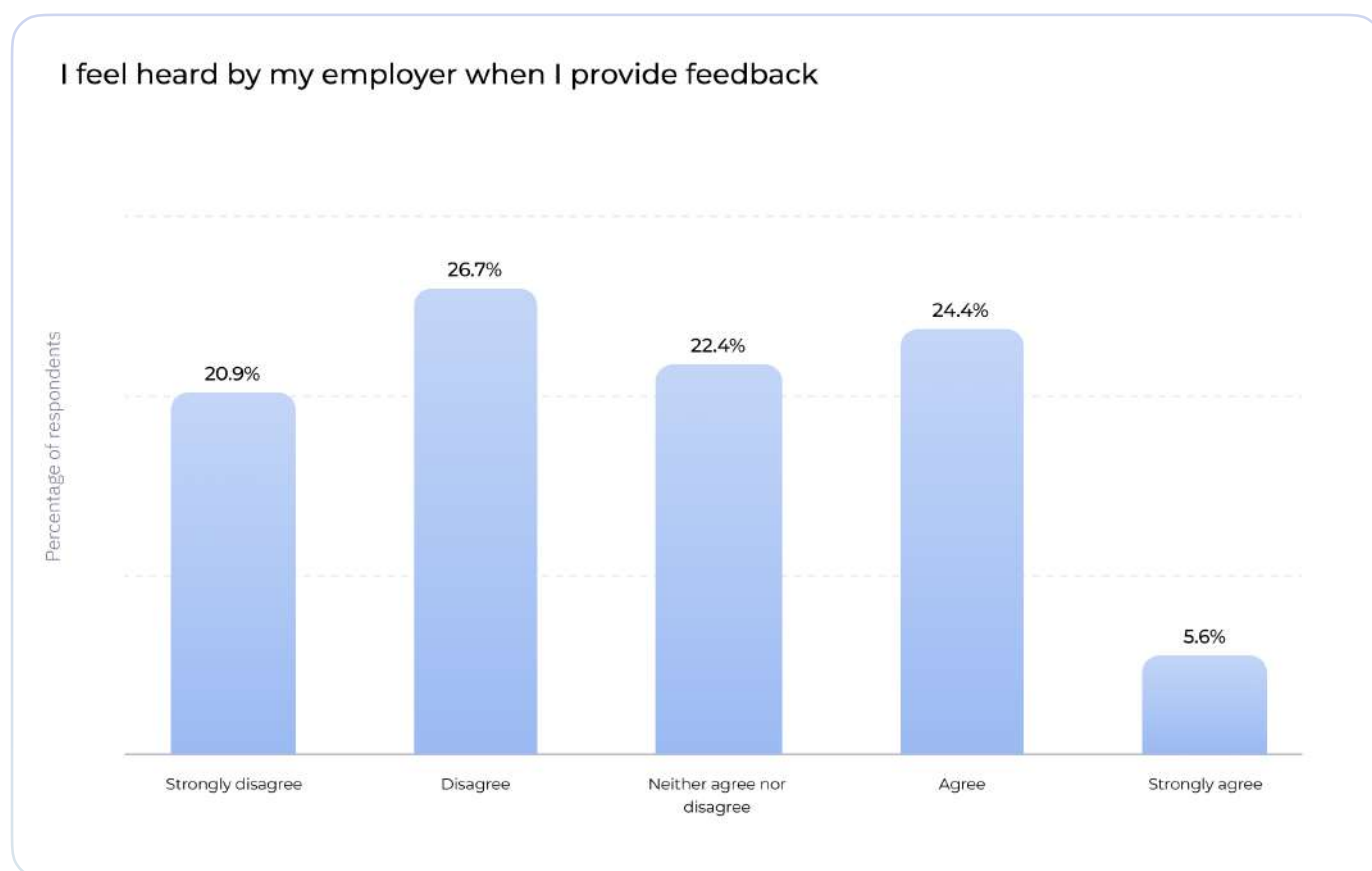


Comments from open-ended questions suggested development of leadership and delegation skills, business acumen and budgeting training, anger management, well-being and grief counseling, substance abuse recovery, and DEI. Other concerns outlined were poor distinction between techs and assistants and poor utilization of support staff. Many respondents highlighted that they would like to have a structured, transparent pathway for their career growth within the hospital. The latter can play a significant role in burnout prevention, as last year's study revealed that employees who set professional goals felt happier, more valued, and less burned out.

Even though this particular question was to understand what type of non-clinical CE veterinary professionals would value the most, an overwhelming number of respondents additionally wrote that staff training should be improved in general, especially for new hires, and that it would be helpful if employees were cross-trained.

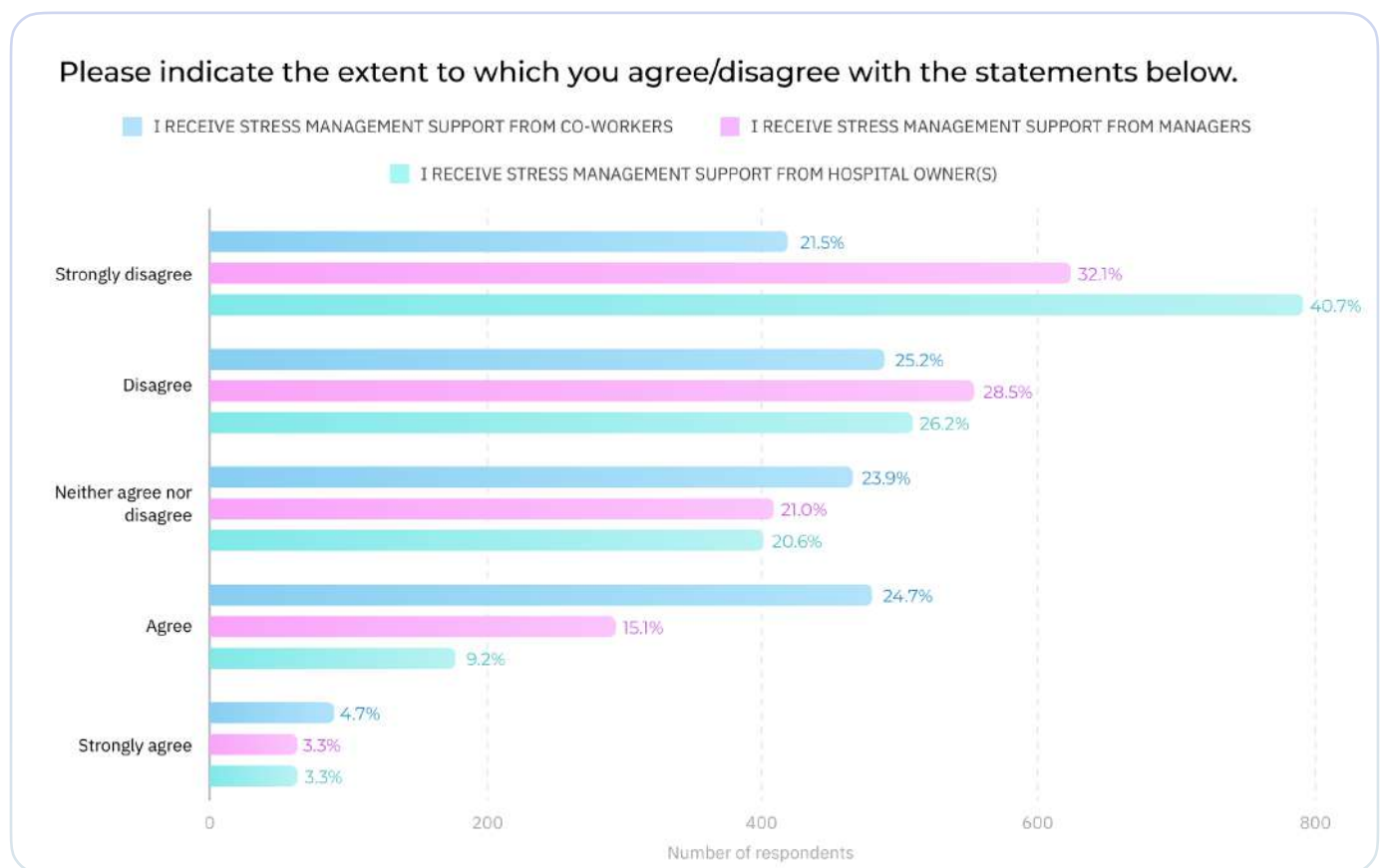
## LACK OF FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT CULTURE HAS A CORRELATION WITH BURNOUT

Almost half of respondents (47.6%) said they didn't feel heard by their employer when they provide feedback.



Burnout was negatively correlated to employee voice defined as, the degree to which an employee feels like their feedback matters within their organization. Those who felt that their feedback was not valued by their employer were more likely to report higher degrees of burnout than those who felt like their feedback was valued.

We also found that support from peers, managers, and practice owners may also be a contributing factor to employee burnout. 46.7% of respondents said they didn't receive stress management support from their coworkers, 60.56% lacked support from their supervisors, and the least support came from practice owners (66.89%). This factor appeared to be a contributor to burnout.



Stop showing favoritism when there are conflicts between team members. Take concerns brought by the team seriously

*Veterinary technician*

Those who felt less supported by their colleagues were more likely to report higher burnout than those who felt supported by their colleagues. This was true regardless of whether the support was coming from one's peers, managers, or practice owners.

**Table X. Correlation between burnout and stress management and employee voice**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Burnout	3.45	0.79				
2. Support (peers)	2.66	1.20	-.30**			
3. Support (managers)	2.29	1.16	-.38**	.57**		
4. Support (hospital owner)	2.08	1.13	-.37**	.46**	.72**	
5. Voice	2.67	1.21	-.44**	.33**	.57**	.58**

Comments from open-ended questions included suggestions to provide on-site mental health and emotional support, likely by a dedicated professional.

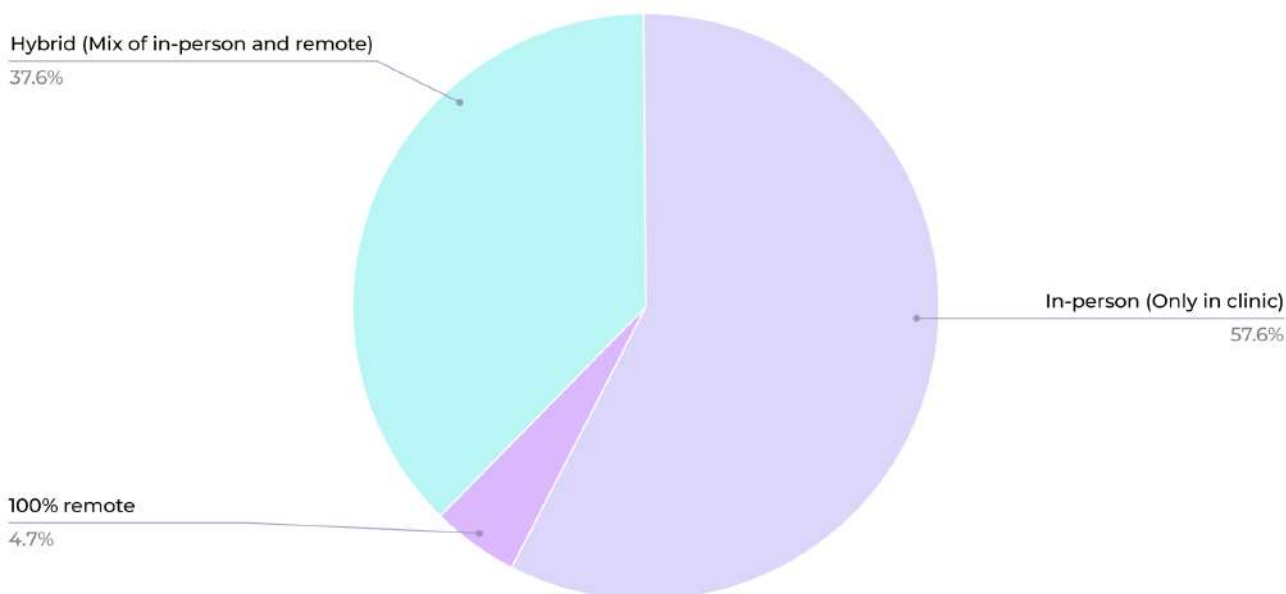
In my case, my manager needs compassion training when it comes to addressing concerns. I constantly hear crickets if I try to offer a point of view, and why I think this is important to bring up [...] I seriously doubt my purpose and value if I am constantly being felt unheard

*Veterinary assistant*

## PREFERENCE FOR REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK ARRANGEMENTS IS ON THE RISE

When asked what type of work arrangement they would prefer, the majority of respondents shared that they would prefer to be in-person (58%), followed by hybrid (38%), and fully remote arrangements (5%).

Please indicate the type of work arrangement you would prefer



*Allow PTO and work from home for admin things*

*Practice manager*



Staff members who worked more closely with the animals, such as veterinarians, veterinary assistants, and technicians were far more likely to say that they preferred to be in-person compared to the more operational roles, such as practice managers and receptionists. Although, the number of veterinarians and technicians who would like to provide virtual care is also relatively high.

### Preferred work arrangement and role



Practice managers and CSRs expressed most interest in occasional work from home

*Flexible schedule. For example, accommodate child care scheduling needs*

*Veterinarian*

Further analysis of this slice revealed that younger professionals and women find remote and hybrid arrangements more lucrative.

### Preferred work arrangement and age

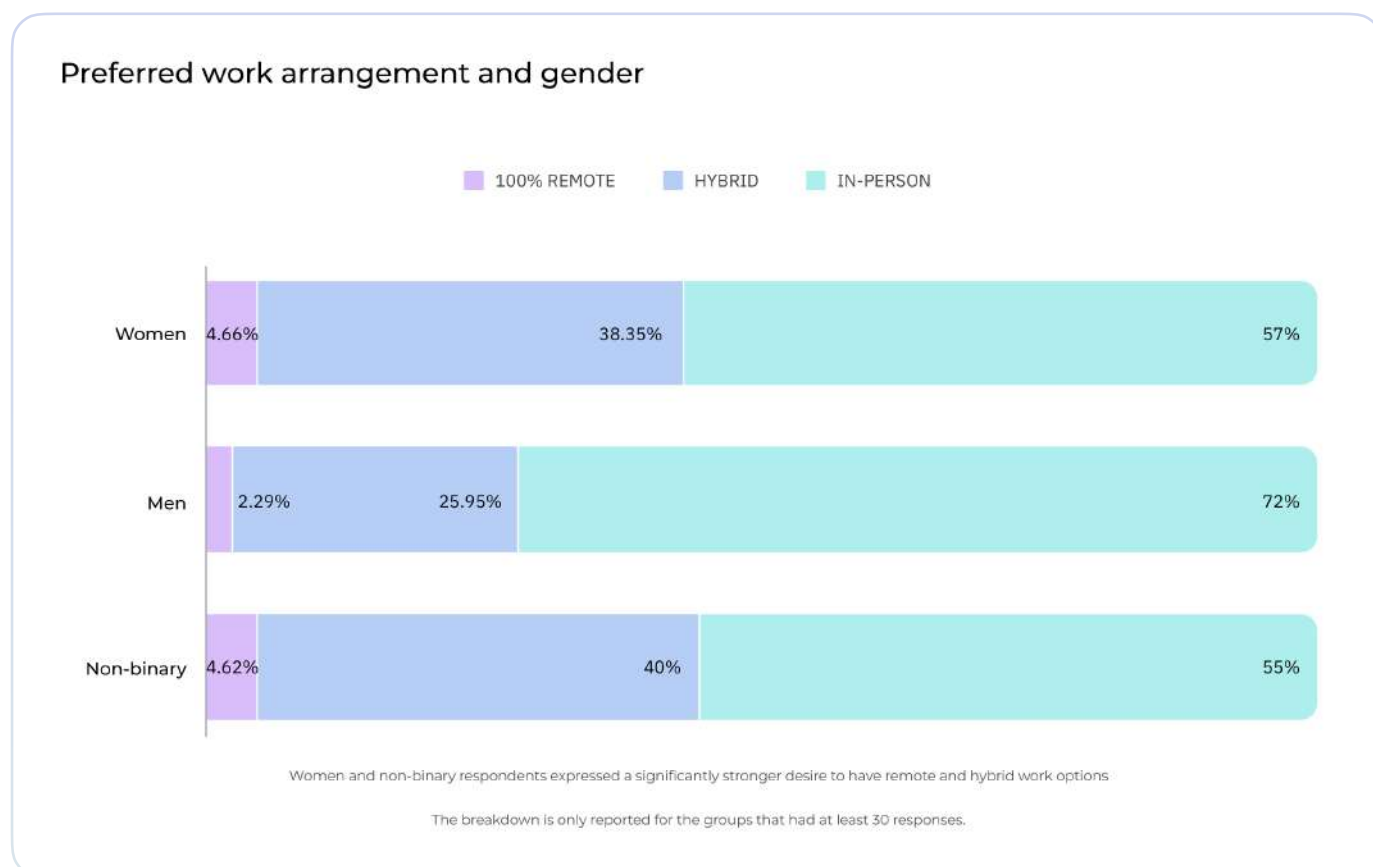


Overall, most prefer in-person across all age groups, however, younger professionals would like to have hybrid/remote options

Recognize the need for balance in life - be OK with time working from home, support mental health, etc

*Veterinarian*

There was also a clear difference in gender, that compared to men, more women(38%), said that they would prefer hybrid work arrangements compared to men (26%.)

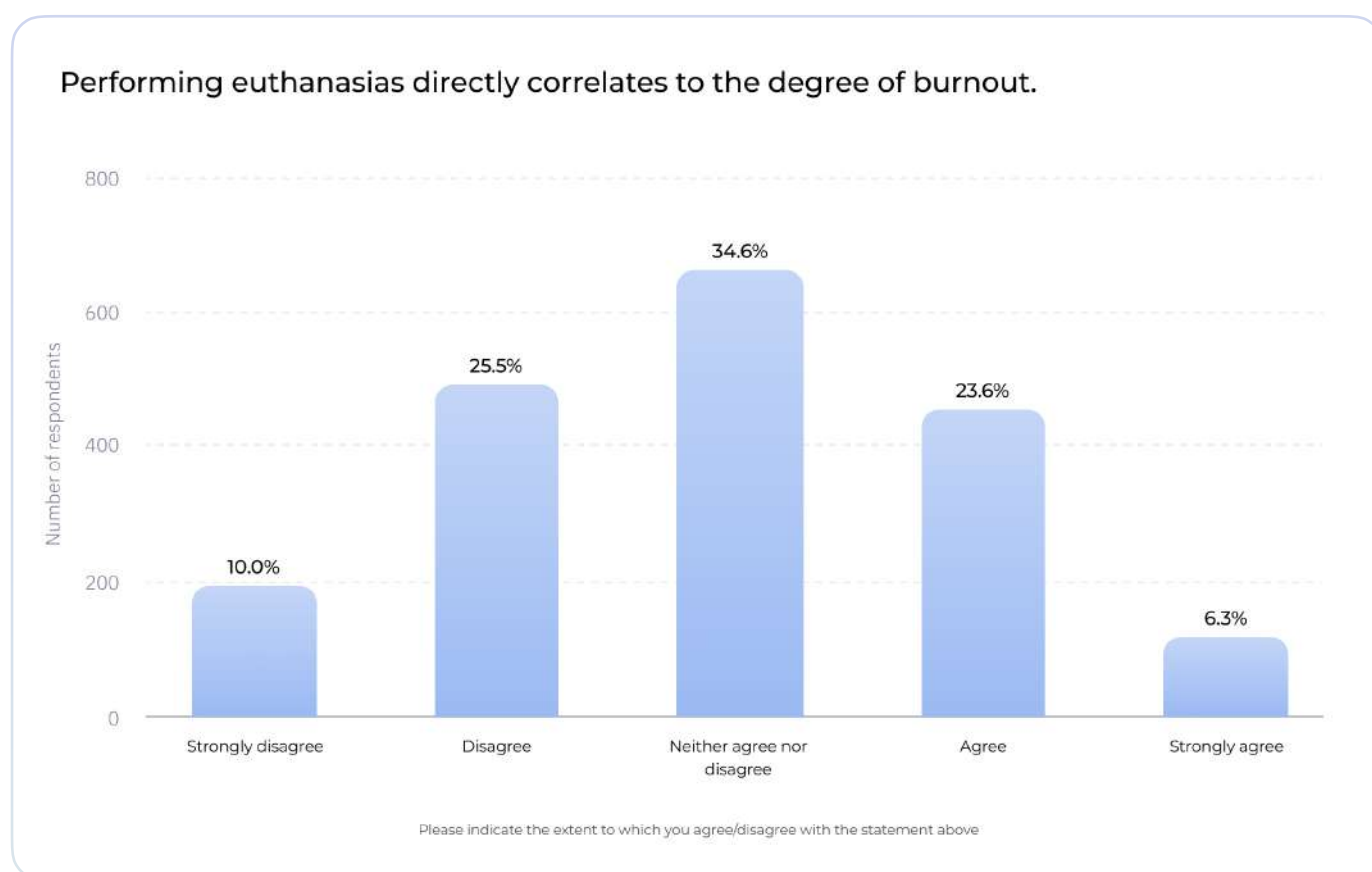


Such a sizable portion preferring hybrid work arrangement suggests that there may be room for incorporating more flexibility that would allow veterinary staff to provide in-person care as well as work from home (i.e., incorporating telehealth into the practice; implementing a rotating schedule that would allow staff to work off-site vs. on-site, etc.)

## ECONOMIC EUTHANASIA IS A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTOR TO BURNOUT

Finally, we explored the relationship between burnout and euthanasia. Only those respondents who confirmed that their hospital performed euthanasias were included in the following analysis.

Self-assessment opinions on whether performing euthanasia correlates to the degree of burnout showed mixed results.



On average, respondents reported euthanizing 17 pets per month. Next, we asked respondents to indicate the percentage of pets they euthanized because their owners couldn't afford treatment. The number was about 20%.

While burnout and the number of pets that were euthanized were unrelated, burnout was significantly linked to the percentage of euthanasia performed due to economic reasons. See Table X. Specifically, staff who regularly performed euthanasia for patients who could not afford to continue taking care of their pets reported higher burnout than staff who performed fewer cases of economic euthanasia.

This particular finding enhances existing research on drivers of burnout among veterinary staff and the potential mental toll that euthanasia can have on the staff, particularly when the euthanasia concerns pets who are being euthanized because their owners cannot financially afford to take care of them.

**Table X. Correlation between burnout and euthanasia**

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Burnout	3.47	0.78		
2. Euthanasia (#)	17.63	35.83	.02	
3. Euthanasia (%) – economic reasons	19.61	21.16	15**	.23**

\* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

I'd say we should have a rule that 4 euthanasias in one day should not be happening but we all know that's impractical. Sad. Draining in all regards, emotionally, physically, spiritually

CSR

## SCHEDULING IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST STRESSORS FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS

One of the most frequently cited inefficiencies that adds to the workload was around scheduling, indicating that this area is one of the biggest sources of stress for the team. Some of the ideas on how to make the day go smoother are included below.

### Hospital policies

- Refuse walk-in non-emergencies
- Limit drop-off appointments
- Limit late appointments and do not admit walk-ins close to the end of the day
- If a person is late for an appointment, turn them away and reschedule
- Stop accepting new patients

### Schedule

- Schedule blocks for records, charts, and call-backs
- Make sure lunch hours are scheduled into the agenda
- Do not schedule surgeries between appointments
- Better schedule techs
- Encourage taking break times
- Reduce hours the hospital is open
- No sick or complicated cases at least an hour prior to closing

### **Caseload management**

- No double-booking
- Put a cap on the number of surgeries that can be scheduled each day (excluding emergencies)
- Limited number of sick or complicated cases per day
- Have technicians screen emergency calls after hours
- Start telehealth appointments
- Reduce the number of rescue intakes

### **Billing**

- Charge clients for no-shows
- Start charging extra for walk-in/drop-off appointments

### **Staffing**

- Better control of staff-to-patient ratio
- Limit admin work for veterinarians
- Having one vet per day doing urgent care so sick pets can be seen the same day without disrupting GP's schedule
- Hire a cleaning crew



## OTHER INSIGHTS: TECHNOLOGY, WORKFLOWS, AND PREFERRED REWARDS

In the open-ended questions, respondents had a chance to share their vision on what their employers could do to improve their lives. As described in the previous section, one of the major stress factors for all team members was inefficient scheduling, heavy workload, and lack of predictability throughout the day.



I have worked at 5 clinics in 15 years and every one of them throws their staff to the wolves in fear of a bad review. This allows clients to continue to abuse staff, ignore recommendations that don't come directly from the veterinarian, and bargain/demand discounts. It's hell. Due to these issues and a severe lack of pay that does not cover my bills, I am leaving the field

*Practice manager*

An overwhelming majority of respondents – mainly veterinary technicians, assistants, and other support staff – highlighted insufficient compensation as their major issue. Many comments concerned difficult clients, stressing that employers should not tolerate abusive behavior and take their team's side in such situations. Some other opinions included better utilization of technology, improving workflows, implementing new policies, and offering new benefits.

### **Technology**

- Leverage technology to free up existing staff
- Go paperless
- Update equipment and facilities
- Training on how to use new equipment or software

### **Workflows**

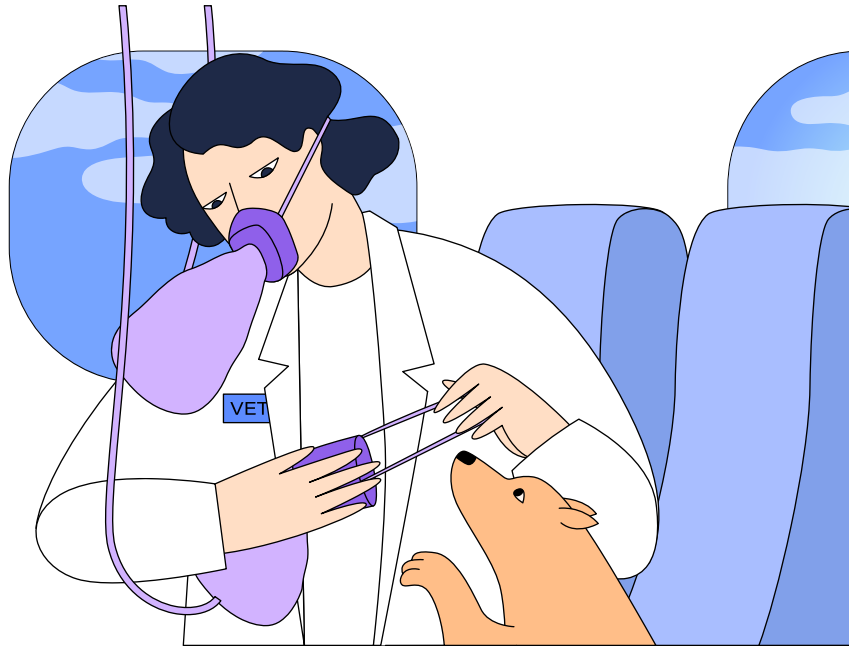
- Reduce the amount of time it takes for info to get from FoH to BoH and back. Either people are reaching out to the wrong place or clients have no idea who to ask for. Inquiries are not being directed well on the front end and a lot of time is spent correcting that.
- Improve the recordkeeping process
- Poor inventory management, hire a dedicated inventory manager
- Hire a dedicated person to manage legal and paperwork

### **Policies and work environment**

- Create more uniform policies and procedures
- Implement policies against bullying and gaslighting
- Having personal space (personal workstation, so there are no fights over computers)
- Firing rude clients
- Investing in sound-blocking walls and keeping dogs outside of the treatment area, so barking dogs don't drive the staff crazy
- Have a security staff member on site for overnight shifts

### **Benefits**

- Pet stipend
- More vacation/PTO
- Mental health PTO days
- Contribute to retirement accounts
- Resource/referral assistance and grief counseling for those in need of assistance
- Fitness classes
- Gym or massage therapy allowance to help reduce injury
- Psychological services, payments for yoga/meditation, or something else of a person's choice (e.g., something about well-being which could be horseback riding for some people, etc), courses about stress management, any practical psychology lectures
- Sign-on or relocation assistance
- Time off during the death of our pets
- Hire a social worker to help facilitate getting help for both staff and owners
- Help paying off student debt
- Partner with a financial adviser to ensure we are doing everything we can to optimize our loan payment plans.



## TAKEAWAYS

### PROVIDE FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOUR EMPLOYEES

Be open to incorporating hybrid work arrangements, such as telehealth, into your practice to provide your staff with more flexibility regarding where they can work. Talk to your employees to identify opportunities that allow for certain positions and roles to work from home. Discuss the needs of both your employees and the practice to identify solutions that would allow for some staff to be on-site versus off-site. Doing so can potentially mitigate burnout, particularly among female staff members who reported higher burnout rates than their male counterparts, and who would benefit from hybrid work arrangements. Given that women are usually the ones who shoulder a heavier workload at home as primary caretakers, providing them with flexible work arrangements can help alleviate some of the stress associated with their dual roles as professionals and caretakers.



Adopting telehealth has a number of other benefits for team well-being. For example, teletriage – remote assessment of a patient’s condition to determine the care needed and provide assistance with immediate needs – can reduce the workload for on-call doctors, hence alleviating burnout caused by the need to be available outside of the office. Teletriage can be performed by licensed veterinary technicians, giving them an opportunity to work virtually and master a new set of skills. Finally, redirecting medical questions to a teletriage team will take a significant weight off the shoulders of CSRs and add more predictability and control to their busy days. To implement teletriage at your hospital, you can either form a virtual team from your employees who can work partially remotely, or partner with a third-party provider as an extension for your existing staff.

## INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Provide your staff with opportunities to participate in employee development programs as a way to keep them engaged. Survey respondents shared that they would welcome professional development opportunities, such as workshops on conflict resolution, communication and negotiation, personal finance, and giving feedback, and this was particularly notable among women. Leaders can sponsor such events for the entire organization or provide reimbursement for employees wishing to attend professional development programs on these topics. Offering professional development opportunities can be one way to address the low professional fulfillment for certain groups, such as CSRs, who are heavily involved in client communication and often suffer from emotional drainage caused by conflict and overwhelm.

## TRAIN EMPLOYEES ON HOW TO PROVIDE STRESS MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TO ONE ANOTHER

Learning how to deal and manage stress is an important skill that is also intricately tied to employee burnout as demonstrated in this study. To best equip your team to manage their stress and support one another, it is important to create an outlet that allows employees to discuss their workload, the resources they need, and their level of stress. By creating a climate where people feel comfortable broaching this topic, leaders can provide ways for employees to feel supported by their colleagues when managing their stress at work. However, it's important not to contribute to the culture of complaint, but to shift the mindset to gratitude and appreciation. Celebrate small wins, establish a recognition program, award effort and intention, and not necessarily the outcome. Make it a tradition to have gratitude practices at staff meetings and acknowledge employees' achievements to foster a sense of care and appreciation among team members.

## PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO EMPLOYEES WHO PERFORM EUTHANASIA

Performing economic euthanasia can have a particularly damaging toll on your employees' mental health given that they must deal with the emotional consequence of performing a medically unnecessary euthanasia due to the owner's financial situation. Consider providing training on ethical theories and mechanisms of coping with moral dilemmas, as well as coaching that covers emotional and psychological wellness topics as a way of offering support to employees who must perform emotionally taxing work.

Expanding payment options in the hospital can help address economic euthanasia from a different angle. These include third-party payment plans, pet insurance, and collaboration with charitable organizations. By educating clients about the alternatives and the importance of preventive care, you can help them relieve the financial burden that can be caused by emergencies or chronic conditions, improve trust and compliance, and ultimately, reduce the number of economic euthanasias.



## LET YOUR EMPLOYEES KNOW THAT THEIR VOICE MATTERS

Provide outlets for employees to voice their concerns and provide feedback so that they feel that their input matters. The best ideas come from the people who do the work – veterinarians, technicians, assistants, CSRs, and everyone on the healthcare team. They are in the best position to see where problems exist, where there is room for improvement, and how best to deliver value to clients and patients. Just in this survey, in the open-ended questions, veterinary professionals offered dozens of ideas on how to improve their daily lives and workflows. They have a wealth of knowledge and plenty of ideas; we just need to know how to ask and listen.

Bottom-up ideas have the most impact because they drive engagement and make employees feel heard. While the best ideas may come from the bottom, they have to be systematically encouraged from the top. Create a culture where every team member is empowered to share their opinions, ideas, concerns, and perspectives, and provide the tools to do so.

Another approach includes employee listening sessions, employee engagement, and pulse surveys allowing to uncover team sentiment and explore the most meaningful ways to add value to their lives. It is important that leadership not only share the feedback that is gathered through such methods, but also consistently provide follow-up opportunities to ensure continued engagement from employees. After all, words without action – when leaders talk the talk, but don't walk the walk – can quickly lose favor among employees.



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## RESEARCHER

### DR. IVAN ZAK

DVM, MBA, CEO at Galaxy Vets



Dr. Ivan “Zak” Zakharenkov is a veterinarian, an entrepreneur and a passionate advocate for the well-being of veterinary professionals. After 12 years in ER and a severe case of burnout, Ivan pivoted to creating products that improve the workflows and experience of veterinary teams. He founded SmartFlow, a workflow optimization system, and Veterinary Integration Solutions, an executive consulting firm helping veterinary consolidators with enterprise management and burnout prevention. Pursuing his goal to make a sizable impact on the veterinary industry, Dr. Zak founded Galaxy Vets, a veterinary healthcare system co-owned by its employees and with burnout prevention as a strategic priority.

Along the way, Ivan obtained an MBA degree in International Healthcare Management with a thesis, “Implementation of Lean Thinking to Improve the Employee Experience.” Along the way, Ivan obtained an MBA degree in International Healthcare Management with a thesis, “Implementation of Lean Thinking to Improve the Employee Experience.” He serves on the board of Galaxy Vets Foundation, and co-hosts two podcasts: Veterinary Innovation Podcast and Consolidate That!

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**For additional information, please contact:**

Dr. Ivan Zak, [drivanzak@galaxyvets.com](mailto:drivanzak@galaxyvets.com)

Dr. Jennifer Kim, [hi@jenniferkimphd.com](mailto:hi@jenniferkimphd.com)

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