

BUSINESS & LEGAL EXTERNSHIPS FOR VETERINARY STUDENTS

December 2007

Re: Notes From James F. Wilson, DVM, JD About Externships

Because of the rapid expansion of the veterinary school VBMA chapters, business education is being expanded at most of veterinary schools in the USA. As a result of that growth, students have shown considerable interest in learning more about business and legal issues than ever before.

Over the past ten years, I have sponsored externships for over 25 students or foreign veterinarians. Since I may have the most experience offering these opportunities for such people, the AVPMCA Career Development Committee has asked me to write up a synopsis of what is expected of mentors and how other AVPMCA members might offer these valuable options for our future colleagues.

As a result of teaching at 15-20 veterinary schools per year for nearly ten years, I know that some schools allow (or in some cases, require) up to six months during the clinical (4th) year to pursue externship experiences, while others have room for only two or four weeks. Many students who aren't working full-time summer jobs have time for such experiences between their first and second and second and third years of vet school. This could be for two weeks or as long as a month. Some of our externs have been with us after the 1st or 2nd year but most come during their clinical, 4th year. One even opted to spend the first two weeks after graduation.

The Career Development Committee hopes that by spelling out what is expected of members who offer these educational experiences and what types of tasks students can perform while completing their externships, the AVPMCA can expand such opportunities for years to come.

What Sponsors Should Offer

1. **Housing.** The deal breaker usually focuses on the availability of no-cost housing. All of our externs have found the funds to pay for their own transportation to and from Yardley, PA. For the first few externs, I rented a room from a friend of ours and they stayed there. However, since Elise's father passed away 4 years ago, they have stayed with us. Fortunately, we have a big house with extra space and I have a spouse who enjoys meeting and feeding the awesome veterinary students who live with us for nearly two week. Every one of them has pitched in and helped with everything from the dishes to some landscaping.
2. **Some meals.** We provide breakfast, dinner, and an occasional lunch. Though this isn't essential, it forces us to take time out for mentoring that is paramount for a successful experience.
3. **Correspondence with Vet Schools.** The majority of the externs have enough credits that they do not need additional credit for this experience. However, about one out of five will need for someone to draft a letter to the school verifying the willingness to sponsor the externship and indicating what will be expected. A sample letter will accompany this outline. About one of ten schools will send materials that need to be completed at the end of the externship indicating your satisfaction with the student's efforts and, in some cases, the provision of a letter grade.
4. **A Work Space & Internet Access.** All of our externs have been flexible with this, sometimes sharing office space with my administrative assistant but, most recently, with an office of their own at my place of work.

5. **Time.** This is probably one of the more difficult things to allocate fairly but I find that unless I spend at least an hour and a half each day giving directions for projects and feedback on work completed, I don't feel good about the externship. Our Labrador, "Blue," has to have his 25 minute (or longer) walk each day and we have found that this is a great time to go over the day's events with our externs and set plans for the next one.
6. **Projects.** Since most of our externs have made plans 6-12 months before coming, I have often been able to line up consultations wherein I know it will be possible to include an extern's perspective. Of note here, and probably true for the rest of you, I have found that if our externs can't use Excel and write and word process documents well, I probably can't use them. That could be different in other types of externships, depending on your consulting expertise and focus.
 - a. **Operational Audits.** Sometimes we do operational audits of practices together where students spend an intensive two days with me interviewing some or all staff members at practices and performing their own "perception of value" analyses of the facility. When this is a primary focus of the externship, it is the extern's responsibility to draft the initial report back to the client. They have saved me many hours assembling first drafts!
 - b. **Phone consultations.** I always ask first if I can include an extern during my phone consults with clients and 95% of the time, the veterinarians with whom I am talking say, "Sure, why not." Externs are told that everything they hear is confidential and I reassure clients of that when they are introduced on the phone. In many cases, by the time we have finished these phone consults, I will have delegated one or more tasks to the externs to research and write up their findings for my editing. Clients win because they have work done on their behalf at no cost. Students win because they often have to do some serious research using resources in the office or on the Internet to complete the assigned task. I win because I can do something else and bill for it while they are helping out.
 - c. **Contract Reviews.** Because I review approximately 40 employment contracts per year, externs nearly always have the opportunity to read through various offers, identify the key issues, and listen in on my consults and coaching sessions with these clients.
 - d. **Expert Witness Opinions.** This is probably unique to me but is one of the premier exercises for students and me. The students have to find the medical issues in each case and research the subject often in more depth than they ever had to in school. Meanwhile, I learn everything current on the particular medical topic and my clients pay \$45/hour for all this research by a student instead of my premium rate.
 - e. **Entering NCVEI Data.** When the possibility arises, I try to have them work with a nearby or new client of mine entering as much of the NCVEI data as is possible.
 - f. **Implementing the "Fair Fees" or "Profit Solver" Program from Dan Zalta.** Since September 2006, three of my externs have spent time entering data as we helped clients install this great fee software program.
 - g. **Journal Articles.** If things slow down during an externship, I always have a subject in mind that might make a good article for *Vet Ec*, *DVM Magazine* or *AAHA Trends* and the student will be assigned to gather the information needed, draft it up, and submit it to me for editing. We then publish the material with them as first or second author and they love the results for their résumé.
 - h. **Speaker Topics.** Whenever a slow period arises, I simply have externs review, update, expand, or improve my teaching materials and Power Point Programs. They often add a student's perspective which is terrific. All of them are familiar with Power Point.

What's Expected of Externs

1. **A Résumé.** I almost always require a résumé at the time they apply for an externship to see how they present themselves and what types of experiences I can draw upon.
2. **A Letter Describing What They Would like to Gain from the Externship.** This helps focus the type of work I line up in advance. Some want the legal experience; others business management.
3. **Completion of a 15-20 Minute Phone or In-Person Interview.** Because I teach at so many schools, I typically meet students seeking these opportunities there and evaluate them in person before offering an externship. However, if they are going to share your home, I always recommend spending some time with them evaluating their “fit.”
4. **Work Hard.** This has never been a problem and usually entails from 9:00 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. with evening work optional.
5. **Transportation to a Nearby Airport.** Most externs fly into Philly and we pick them up. About 10% drive their own vehicle. The ones that don't have a car have access to one of our cars if they need it.
6. **Week Ends.** There is usually one week end during their stay and they have the option of taking the train to NYC or Philly or sticking around our place. Many have friends or family somewhere in the area and opt to visit them. Some just borrow a car from us and go off on their own.
7. **Absolute Confidentiality.** Because they learn a lot of details about awkward or difficult “pickles” my clients find themselves in, I make it very clear that confidentiality is crucial. I do not have them sign any agreement, although one could if he or she wanted to.
8. **Help with the Dishes.** This may sound silly and rarely do we have to say anything but the rule is if Elise cooks, the externs and I get to do the dishes. Again, this is good “talk time” if they are sharing your home.

Summary

Some externs have proven to be more energetic, focused, competent, and/or valuable than others. Nonetheless, not one has been a dud. With some it takes more effort to determine whether we are meeting their needs or not but all have left with the realization that the law and business segments of their careers will need a lot more attention than any of them ever dreamed! Our hope is that this will make them better future colleagues and, in many cases, future consulting clients as they need help purchasing, buying into or starting practices.

Sincerely yours,

James F. Wilson, DVM, JD
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